GENTLEMEN MARCH

CHIVALRY · AUDACITY · LOYALTY

By ROLAND PERTWEE

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GENTLEMEN MARCH

By Roland Pertwee

THIS new novel by the author of 'Rivers to Cross' is a modern masterpiece of romance. Nicholas Cheyne meets in Paris a school-girl, with whom he falls in love. When, however, he learns that Natalie is heir to the throne of Sciriel, he attempts to conquer his apparently hopeless passion by enlisting in the Foreign Legion.

After seven years of service Nicholas discovers that the Great War has brought about the overthrow of the reigning house of Sciriel. He promptly departs from the Legion to seek and rescue Natalie, whom he thinks of no longer as a Crown Princess, but as a woman to whom he may once more aspire.

The story of his swiftly moving adventures in Sciriel is intensely thrilling. Gaining the confidence of Foscani, the so-called Liberator, he plots the escape of the Princess, the destruction of Foscani's army, and the restoration of Natalie to the head of the State. How he carries out these plans single-handed makes a story of chivalry, audacity, and courage that will stir the blood of every reader.

If you enjoy 'Gentlemen March' read Pertwee's earlier and equally exciting novel, RIVERS TO CROSS.

GENTLEMEN MARCH

ROLAND PERTWEE

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GENTLEMEN MARCH

BY
ROLAND PERTWEE
AUTHOR OF 'RIVERS TO CROSS'

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TO

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GENTLEMEN MARCH

BOOK I

On a Paris Roof-Top

GENTLEMEN MARCH

BOOK I

ON A PARIS ROOF-TOP

I

NICHOLAS, or more commonly 'Nikko,' Cheyne was of a family about which it was said that, save in the matter of personal courage, no two members were alike.

Of his grandfather's five sons — the Cheynes did not breed daughters — there remained alive only Nikko's uncle, the ninth Baron Cheyne of Querne.

The rest had died — variously. The South African War accounted for the two younger sons, their bodies being buried side by side on the crest of Spion Kop.

Theodore, the poet of the family, was knifed in a Chinese gambling-hell at Palo Condore. He might have avoided being knifed if his interest in what was going on about him had not taken precedence over interest in his own personal safety. It may be said, then, that Theodore died of an insatiable curiosity. His estate realised three volumes of sensitive verse, a few pieces of Chinese porcelain, an unofficial wife in Yatakan, and aching hearts in other parts of the globe.

Nikko's father was a curiously stray individual who fitted nowhere. His dead body was rescued with difficulty from the bottom of a gorge in the Himalayas, whither he had gone in search of rhododendrons. Nikko's father was not adventurous, but he had a passion for flowers and did not consider the incon-

venience or peril in which he placed himself or others in the pursuit of his passion.

Yet, for all his careless disregard of responsibility, he had left in his son's mind a gracious and knightly impression.

Of his dead mother Nikko could remember very little, beyond a sense of haunting gentleness and a face calm, grave, and beautiful. To her, poor soul, were not given the fruits of life. Circumstances had ordained that she should belong to that class of woman who is always seeing someone off or waiting to welcome them back — with little else of occupation between these recurring events.

Nikko was eighteen when the news came of his father's death.

The lawyers told him he could safely count on two hundred a year, but no more. The rhododendron expedition, they said, had swallowed up most of the capital.

With two hundred a year the prospect of going up to Oxford vanished.

'But at your uncle's death you inherit Querne and the title,' said Mr. Lush, the junior partner. 'Obviously it's his duty to see you through.'

'Never met my uncle,' said Nikko. 'What's he like?'

The lawyer looked for a descriptive word and found it.

'Tough,' he said.

Undeterred, Nikko went to Querne.

Mr. Lush had not overstated the case in describing Lord Cheyne as tough.

Sustained by the knowledge that in his veins, howbeit remotely, ran the blood of kings, the old man had accumulated in himself many royal vices, but few of their virtues. In his own esteem his sins and omissions,

his brutality, drunkenness, and the manner in which he squandered the family fortunes were justifiable and amiable characteristics.

He was a man who twisted traditions to suit his purpose. He never paid his debts. He was a liar and a braggart, and had not been sober to bed for a matter of forty years. Although utterly without fear, he shrank from the thought of death, inasmuch as death would mean handing over what was his to another.

Chiefly on this account he disliked his nephew at first sight and lost no time in making the dislike apparent.

'You best think of other plans if your idea is to mark time at Querne until I turn up my toes,' said he.

Nikko, lithe as an ash — square-browed and with eyes as blue as a strip of Channel water — grew hot and angry.

'It isn't.'

'Damn it, the boy flushes like a ninny,' his uncle chuckled. 'Did you learn that trick from a fancy girl, eh?'

Nikko shut his mouth very tight and wanted to walk out of the house then and there.

A boy's mind may run coarsely enough in the company of his fellows and still find licence from a senior profoundly distasteful.

Then a luncheon gong bayed, and the libidinous old man smacked his lips in greedy anticipation.

There was another guest at the table, Dr. Smailey, a purple-faced old chap, round as a plum — and rollicking. One of Lord Cheyne's cronies he was, and few days passed that they did not get boozed in each other's company.

On a side table steamed a huge baron of beef. Lord Cheyne was helped enormously as also was the doctor.

Outside snow was falling.

'Volnay,' said Cheyne, 'three bottles of Volnay,' and tossed a bunch of keys to the butler. 'You good for a bottle, Nicholas?'

Nikko asked for beer and felt a prig for doing so.

'Boy knows his own mind,' Smailey laughed.

'There are things better worth knowing,' said Cheyne, and roared.

It was the first time Nikko had been with such proficient drinkers. Bottle after bottle went gurgling down. The air was Burgundian.

Outside the snow gathered.

'Spoil the huntin' chances,' said Smailey. 'You hunt, boy?'

'I can ride a bit, sir.'

'Damme, you shall prove your words,' said Cheyne thickly, and gave orders to saddle Prince.

'Ground's hard, Jas.'

'Young bones ain't brittle,' was the answer.

Nikko caught the twinkle in his uncle's eye and guessed something was to be planted on him. A test of nerves or courage. Good! His fingers itched ambitiously, and when a mighty duff of plums and raisins and peel was cleared away, he pushed his chair back expectantly.

'Sit in,' Cheyne commanded; then to Smailey, 'Is the young cockerel ignorant that gentlemen drink port?'

Certainly Nikko was ignorant how much port gentlemen drink. Heavy port, too, none of your light tawny, but the real stuff with almost as much body as those old wines the monks used to scoop up with horn spoons.

To Nikko, impatiently longing to escape from the fuddled atmosphere, it seemed that this ceremony of

the port would never end. The decanter swung to and fro between host and guest like a pendulum. Tongues loosened, voices thickened, bodies bedded heavily into chairs. Stories, clumsy and coarse and battered by time, were revived and chuckled over. Two hours of port and prurience is not attractive to a healthy-minded boy, and when at last his uncle rose heavily from the table Nikko's patience was at the end of its tether.

Cheyne was manifestly under the influence of liquor, but of the two the doctor was the more severely overtaken. His journey to the door was like the track of a rudderless ship in a squall of wind. He bumped against panel and furniture — he tottered and swore, while Cheyne, his great bulk rocking this way and that, roared with laughter and accused him of being drunk.

'Ye'd be a damn bad host if I wasn't,' the doctor replied. 'Here, boy, lend us an arm and let's have a bite of fresh air.'

The great steps leading down from the front door were slippery with lumps of trodden snow. In the courtyard a groom walked up and down leading a blanketed horse. The northeast wind snapped its teeth at them as they came out.

'That's the tonic!' said the doctor.

The groom stopped and touched his cap.

'He's a bit fresh, m'lord ——'

'So much the better. Get up — don't stand looking, boy.'

The courtyard was flanked on the left by a low wall with a sunk garden beyond. Cheyne pointed.

'Nice jump — won't harm the lawn with this frost.'

The groom swallowed a protest.

'Damn it, Jas,' came from the doctor.

Nikko dug in his heels and took the jump. He mar-

velled how he kept his seat at the jar which followed the long drop on the far side. Luck, he supposed. Prince gathered himself together and flung onward. Nikko tugged at his right rein to avoid a high yew hedge and Prince came round in his own length with hoofs cutting scores in the frozen earth. After that there was nowhere to go but into a sunk rock-garden, which jagged the snow with its black fins. So Nikko wheeled his horse and went back by the way he had come. Off that surface and from the under side it was a terrifying jump. The wall seemed to rear up like the side of a house. But Prince took off from a dug-up flower bed and cleared it — topping the wall as old Cheyne came across the courtyard to see what was doing. Nikko had a glimpse of the brick-red face plumb in his path. He shouted, but it was too late. Man, horse, and boy crashed to the ground in a solid kicking mass. There was a crack like a shot from a pistol and old Cheyne crawled away dragging a leg which had suddenly developed an extra joint.

2

PRIDE would not allow the old man to voice a single expression of physical anguish, but his cynical hostility toward his nephew increased out of all bounds.

'Thought you could ride,' he taunted. 'Ye said so. A nice legacy that boast has brought me, eh?'

Nikko Cheyne went to his room to pack. On his return he met Smailey fortifying himself with neat brandy.

Drink and the accident to his friend and patron had conspired to make the little doctor thoroughly maudlin.

'Is it a bad smash?' Nikko asked.

'Femur — high up — Lord, yes — bad! God knows if I'll be able to set it.'

Nikko hesitated.

'Then hadn't you better ——' he broke off and started again. 'I suppose you'll telephone for an assistant.'

'It'll mean plaster — three months in plaster. He'll never ride again.' And Smailey drew the back of his hand across his eyes.

Sentiment at a time when action was needed galled Nikko.

'Shall I ring up someone?'

Smailey shook his head.

'No — the Barchester men don't like me. Besides — now,' he looked at his glass and shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm not fit to meet — it'ud be a mistake — lot of jealousy about. Cheyne'll do until the morning — with a sedative.'

'But surely ——'

'That's heavy port — mistake to drink — workin' hours.' Nikko marched back to his uncle's room.

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'That ye didn't make a clean job of it, eh?'

Nikko stifled a retort, for the old man was in pain. He said:

'Oughtn't you to have a surgeon to attend you, sir?'

'Smailey is a surgeon.'

'Yes, sir, but ——'

'But he's drunk, eh?'

Nikko was not to be trapped into replying.

'I'll wait till he's sober,' said old Cheyne.

'I see, sir.'

'But don't approve, what? Ever heard of the obligations of friendship, Nicholas?'

The boy nodded.

'Of course.'

'Well, think it over.'

'I was wondering,' said Nikko, 'if I could be any use — if you'd care for me to stop a week or two?'

'No use at all,' said old Cheyne.

'Then I'll say good-bye, sir.'

He waited for an answer, but the old man appeared to have forgotten him.

Nikko Cheyne walked to the station carrying his bag.

The clean wind driving across the snow was good after the vinous odours of Querne. It set his spirits dancing to a younger tune. It had been a day of false values. He had known his uncle to be hard and bitter-tongued, and yet he had looked to receive some kind of welcome and even of sympathy for the loss of his father. Instead he had met only resentment. For the accident, though he deeply regretted what had occurred, he took no blame to himself. It might well have been his own neck rather than his uncle's leg that had been broken. In Nikko's code that sort of thing didn't matter.

There had been no sentiment at stake on either side. The whole episode had been directed by irony. The Cheynes as a family took what came to them without complaint or lamentation. They were hard-bitten and self-contained. They did not intrude their misfortunes upon others. The family motto, 'Bear thy Cross,' they read and obeyed literally.

Nikko admired his uncle's loyalty in refusing to call in another doctor. It was one of those gallant, if futile gestures that make an instant appeal to the imagination. He was grateful to the old man for giving him something to carry away and respect. But Nikko was glad — terribly glad that what small respect the old man had inspired sprang from an ethical rather than a material cause. Even though in due course he would

inherit the estate, its profits and encumbrances, he could never have tolerated being dependent upon his uncle's bounty. After all he had two hundred a year and a young man of simple tastes can travel a goodish way on less than that. He must abandon, of course, any thoughts of the 'Varsity, but this he could do without regret. The 'Varsity had been a convention in his mind, for he had no great taste for scholarship. His bent inclined toward an adventurous and wider form of existence. A life where things happened swiftly — unexpectedly.

There was no one to care what he did or what might befall him. Not even a trustee. At eighteen he was a free agent — and his own master. Here was a spacious if lonely thought. No one to care — and now that his father was dead — no one for whom he cared. There had been school friends, but when school days are over and the world opens its doors to youth, friendships are scattered and the swift, ardent attachments of boy for boy drift out of touch. A few survive — a few may be revived — but the great majority are closed down and cast aside with the old primers whose services are at an end.

Nikko Cheyne, bag on shoulder, courage and expectation in his heart, strode on across the glistening snow toward the world of adventure.

3

Nikko Cheyne had one room in the Hôtel de l'Univers et de Madagascar. Why Madagascar was not absorbed into the universe with other suns, stars, planets, continents, countries, and islands is a question to which there appears to be no satisfactory answer. For this room he paid twenty francs a month. It boasted a bed and a table draped with torn muslin, bearing a mirror, a

highly polished floor of bare boards, a washstand and an extensive view of the chimney pots of Paris. To reach it Nikko mounted one hundred and sixty-two stairs. There was no bathroom in the Universe, nor in Madagascar. There was a dining-room on the ground floor, but no one, except flies and the proprietress, investigated its mysteries. Nikko's modest requirements were brought to him by Benoit — the *frottoir* — the *valet de chambre*. Benoit wore brushes on the soles of his boots and shuffled all day long in rooms and passages to keep the floors bright. Benoit brought shaving-water and candles, but nothing else. *Petit déjeuner* was not served above the fifth floor. Six, seven, eight, and nine had to get it elsewhere. If confined to one's room through sickness on the sixth, seventh, eighth, or ninth floor, it was possible to perish of starvation. Benoit had two ambitions, the first that he would marry a stout wife and the second that no one should slide on his polished floors.

Below stairs was a concierge who wore a crisp black frock and a cap of 'Valenciennes.' Her name was Rosabelle and although she was only a little old woman in a box she had a voice like a bird singing in a wood. It was her habit to trill at Nikko's approach — a swift, musical ripple of greeting. To her Nikko was not as other young men. He was fair — he was gallant — he was, in short, 'Milord.' Sometimes, because she had no son of her own, she kissed Nikko and Nikko, who had no mother of his own, returned the kiss, and both felt better on that account.

Sitting in her little niche by the door Rosabelle saw visions of other people's futures — visions inspired by looking at their features as they passed. She would prophesy the rise or fall of the guests, and often her prophecies came true. A tiny skylight in the ceiling of

her box afforded a four by two glimpse of the heavens, and well it may be that the stars in their courses advised her.

Nikko's future puzzled and distressed Rosabelle. Purpose she divined — perseverance and a great, great love. Then she would break off — shake her head with its porcelain curls and add:

'But there is chivalry — oh, *mon cher petit* — beware of chivalry.'

Nikko laughed.

'That's queer counsel.'

'But true, *chéri*. Chivalry can be a greater enemy than friends to love.'

Strange talks they had — talks rudely interrupted at times by the intrusion of Madame — Madame *la patronne* with her swishing silk, narrow hips, immense bust, and her hair, dressed *à la pompadour*, rising in clouds above her head. Madame felt that she was being cheated if her servants or dependants had leisure for speech. She was one for bustling round, finding them jobs and setting them right. She did not waste much civility above the sixth floor. She would clap her hands briskly and exclaim:

'Eh, *maintenant!*'

With Rosabelle, Nikko stood for adorable youth; with Madame, for precisely twenty francs a month with just that extra trifle made out of the candles. It is probable that the divine woman is composed out of an amalgam between two such personalities as Rosabelle and Madame. Spiritual — practical.

Nikko was never very clear why he had elected to live in Paris or to become an art student. He had responded to an impulse. His equipment for the job was modest enough. It may be that he was drawn to art by an appreciation of its difficulties. The unattain-

able had a lure for him that he never attempted to resist. There was no excitement in a life spent doing what one could do when there was always a chance of achieving a higher standard.

Down the centuries it was common among the Cheynes for an outcrop of rough artistic expression to emerge. Nikko knew that of creative ability he had none, but he had what in a measure filled the gap — intelligence, clever hands, and application.

At the atelier he met men from all over the world, white, black, yellow, and brown. As there was none to urge hard work or encourage idleness, there was no discipline save that which was self-imposed. Nikko, fresh from the cast-iron tradition and rule of thumb decrees of a public school, was glad of this, his first chance to be master of himself.

He went through the ragging which is the lot of every *nouveau* with unflinching good humour. He realised that to these students who were to be his fellows he must have looked profoundly simple, marching into the atelier, a brand-new easel under his arm, a brand-new colour box in one hand, and canvas about ten by seven inches in the other.

New arrivals in unfamiliar surroundings have a way of looking ridiculous. Four students seated as 'donkeys' before the model throne, on beholding Nikko, simultaneously emitted a wail of grief and despair and fell to the floor to all appearance in a dead faint. Their fall was responsible for the collapse of half a dozen easels and a number of stools of various heights. Came shrieks of execration and yells of diabolical laughter. A very young man with a very old beard pointed a quivering finger at Nikko's diminutive canvas and cried aloud:

'It is the second coming of Meissonier.'

Then someone shot out a leg and brought Nikko to the ground — the contents of his colour box scattering in all directions. There was a scramble for souvenirs. A French boy from the south picked up a tube of colour about the size of a child's little finger and screamed in ecstasy that it was flake white.

'Flake white, my children, this exquisite jewel. It shall be set in a pin and worn in my tie.'

Nikko was not aware that students do not use canvases that are ten by seven inches, and that they buy their white by the pound in tubes larger than a Cambridge sausage. Here was knowledge only to be garnered from experience.

Came then the *Massier*, leader and spokesman of the atelier, a tripping little man with a pointed moustache, a pointed toe, and twinkling eyes.

'By what name,' he asked, 'is Monsieur graced?'

Nikko gave his name and the *Massier* made a gesture to heaven.

'It is a misfortune that must be faced,' he said. 'Does Monsieur contemplate introducing his name and his person into our select community?'

Nikko nodded.

'Here again,' said the *Massier*, 'is a misfortune that must be faced. Monsieur is audacious.' He stretched out a hand, took the canvas from Nikko, and shook his head sadly over it. 'We here,' he said, 'paint to the size of life and do not attempt the delicate craft of the miniature. Were Monsieur to be a second Vermeer of Delft or a Meissonier there is little doubt that this canvas would be added to the treasures of the ages, but as I perceive Monsieur is neither one nor the other, I can find no better use for it than this.' And dexterously he shot a pointed toe through the frame.

It was the bright, twinkling light in the eyes of the

Massier that persuaded Nikko, sublimely, pathetically ignorant of all that pertained to the study of art, to resist the impulse to pick him up and chuck him bodily across the studio. Experience had taught him that every institution has its own methods of initiating a new member, and it needed but a cursory glance to right and left to prove that he and his outfit were hardly assorted to the Atelier Florian. If later a fight developed, he would gladly give account of himself, but for the nonce it seemed wiser to sit tight and learn.

'Gentlemen of the *Saint Office*,' said the *Massier*, 'we will gather round this being from another world and enquire into his merits. You, Nicholasse Chenny, will stand upon that stool and lean your back against the wall while your fate is being decided.'

Except that he felt rather a fool mounted on the stool with a half-circle of grinning faces below him, Nikko did not mind. He folded his arms and leant against the wall as he was told to do.

'Ah, a thousand pardons, I had forgotten,' exclaimed the *Massier*, 'the wall behind you is rich with palette scrapings — I fear that your elegant coat will be ruined. No, no, I beg you not to move.'

Nikko remained perfectly still.

'My children, the Silence.'

Until now there had been a continuous Babel of voices in half a dozen foreign tongues. It stopped suddenly and there followed a silence so complete that the rumble of carts from the Rue du Dragon was the only sound audible. Between thirty and forty pairs of eyes were focussed upon Nikko in an unwavering stare. The *Massier* held a watch in his hand. Seconds ran into minutes — one — two — three.

'*Bon*,' said the *Massier*, and a crash of talk broke loose.

Nikko did not realise at once that what was being said was without exception criticism in derogation of himself.

One youth with a nimble and poetic mind expressed the opinion that a splash of mud on the toe of one of Nikko's shoes was an oasis in an otherwise sterile desert. Some of the views expressed by others were of coarser flavour, but Nikko's French, though fluent, was not yet colloquial, so much that was said lost its sting. It was decided by the gentlemen of the Holy Office that, all things considered, the *nouveau* had stood the ordeal with excellent good humour.

They threatened his body with a poker skilfully painted to represent red heat, the which had been substituted for one extracted from the studio stove, but Nikko did not flinch at its approach. He guessed it was a bluff and insolently gripped the presumably hot end with bare hands. Thereafter they called upon him to sing and commanded that the song should be ribald. So Nikko sang 'One more river to cross' with such excellent point that his hearers were confident that the substance of the song was very ribald, indeed, and were mortified at their inability to understand a word of it.

A couple of young Americans, realizing that the *nouveau* was putting up a game show, supported the illusion to the extent of declaring in strange French that it was certainly the most improper song to which they had had the pleasure of listening.

'My boy,' advised the taller of the two, 'buy this bunch a drink all round and I guess they'll pass you out first class.'

So, headed by Nikko and the *Massier*, the whole company trooped over the road to a little café — where they drank *grog Américaine*, syros, and black coffee to the accompaniment of singing, the stamping

of feet, and the chucking about of furniture. And although it was only eight-thirty in the morning everyone waxed merry and noisy and rather destructive. A few models, girls mobilised from other studios and hastily dressed in male garments, graced the company. And these took sips from glasses and sat on anybody's knee and stole cigarettes, giving kisses in return and generally proved themselves jolly fine fellows.

Nikko's bill was eight francs and not a soul thought it other than a generous entertainment.

At the conclusion a toast was drunk to the 'Veri good Rosbif,' after which Nikko Cheyne was absorbed into the heart of the community of individuals that went to the making of the Atelier Florian.

The party broke up — furniture from the café, in accordance with an ancient tradition, was carried forth bodily to be cast into the middle of the roadway, and the younger generation of artists, the future Sargents, Manets, Watteaus, Goyas, Botticellis, and Michelangelos, refreshed and inspired, went clattering back over the cobbles and up the wooden staircase to submerge themselves in the mysteries of their craft.

4

It was a free, a spacious life — *the* life for the man who had the gift and the skill to tutor his hand to obey the command of eyes and brain, but it did not take Nikko Cheyne very long to realise that such a man he was not. He worked remorselessly but in vain. One and all his studies bore the unmistakable stamp of courageous failure.

The Master—*le grand Maître* Jean-Jacques Ribot, a grave, gray-faced, bearded giant of a man, with a shag of hair over his ears and strong stubby-fingered

hands — was quick to disclose Nikko's shortcomings. He laid his faults bare with brilliant, illuminating shafts.

'See now, let me examine your work with your eyes and show you the result,' said he, and pointed at the model seated on the throne. 'You have been looking at one thing at a time, rather than at all things simultaneously. You have built up a face out of many features and put hair upon its head. You have throttled the neck with a kerchief and pulled a coat over a shape that is not the shape of any shoulders known to God or man. You have copied what you believe to be the likeness of a form and you have dressed it piece by piece with separate articles of apparel. You have seen many different things and have thrown them together like beads into a box. You have done the work of a valet, but not of a painter. Look now with my eyes — with the eyes of an artist. I do not see a ragged coat or kerchief with pieces that might belong to a man emerging from it. I see only light playing over form — so that, but for a colour difference, there is no distinction or division between the neck and the shoulder where flesh and clothing unite. I see a mass of shapes and values, some great, some small, weaving a pattern, which united express that man as a whole, telling the tale of his life — his condition — and all there is to be said of him in one clear statement. Bits do not go to the making of a picture, my young friend, which is something like a great life that has no relation to mere detail. You have trained your hand to some measure of skill — but the task awaits you to train your mind to grasp and reduce the elements before you to a simple statement — a broad outlook and a grand idea.'

The master's words had far-reaching effects on the eager imagination of Nikko Cheyne. It was a lesson

applicable to the whole of life. The Broad View and the Grand Idea became his unspoken watchword.

Tragedy lay in his inability to apply the inspiration to his work. His tidy fiddling brush lacked the power of delving beneath the shadow surface of his subject.

Every ardent spirit knows its moments of despair, and during the months that followed gloom descended upon Nikko Cheyne in heavy waves.

In the ateliers of Paris moods are understood and ignored. None troubles to seek out the solitary man or bid him be gay. They leave him to his own loneliness. He may perish of it and no one cares. The certainty that he was unlikely to master even the fringes of his art filled Nikko Cheyne with angry mortification. Art had become to him so very big — a foe so worthy to be conquered — and yet, for all his will to conquer, she repulsed him at every turn.

Looking at his failure squarely, Nikko was surprised to be dejected at it. He had no great love for Art, nor any real ambition to excel as a painter. What galled him was the injury to his pride — the knowledge that he was up against a door too heavy to push open.

He hated to confess himself beatable, for, somewhere within himself, a will to win struggled for the chance to prove itself.

That the chance would come, he was confident, but from where and to what purpose were questions only time could answer.

In the meanwhile Nikko Cheyne mutilated canvas after canvas with vigour and determination and wondered resentfully for what purpose he had been brought into the world.

5

THE Princess Natalie Melliora Maria Elizabeta of

Sciriel, in company with six other young ladies from the establishment of Mademoiselle Suresme and under the ægis of that lady herself, walked demurely through the galleries of the Louvre.

It was a 'students' day,' which is to say that a number of men and women, mostly of great age, were engaged in the grievous performance of copying the great masters.

The Princess Natalie was familiar with the galleries of the Louvre, it being a feature of Mademoiselle Suresme's educational policy to familiarise her charges with the best examples of the nation's art.

The Princess Natalie did not care for pictures any more than most girls of sixteen, but she enjoyed going to the galleries on students' day, to look at the funny copies and the funny people who made them. It supplied her mind with occupation while Mademoiselle Suresme delivered herself of little addresses on the exhibits. As an art lecturer Mademoiselle Suresme did not excel. She would talk of 'tints' and 'hues' and 'pretty arrangements.' She could not pass a Titian without speaking of 'Titian red' or a Rubens without saying how hard he must have worked. She was very firm on dates, but of technique she had little to say. She would pass 'La Vierge aux Rochers' with

'Leonardo da Vinci, 1452–1519.'

After which, she would purr over a Greuze.

Because of the great simplicity of her mind, the Princess Natalie was very fond of Mademoiselle Suresme and was glad to please her.

In the Suresme Establishment, Natalie was not addressed as 'Princess.' For convenience she went incognito and became Mademoiselle Natalie Montressor. Montressor was the family name of the Ruling House of Sciriel. Of course her schoolmates knew who she was

and patiently searched their atlases to locate the whereabouts of her native country. Sciriel was not a very large country and Balkan States are perplexing. Often their fingers would travel up and down the devious course of the Danube and over the tops of the Carpathian Mountains in fruitless search.

Very occasionally Natalie spoke of Sciriel.

'We are not under the suzerainty of any of the large powers. We belong to ourselves.'

'Have you a navy?'

'There is no seaboard and our rivers are shallow.'

'A big army, I suppose.'

Natalie shook her head.

'We do not need an army. There are only the Palace Guards.'

An American girl in the process of being finished, enquired under what government they were 'operated.'

'From the throne,' was the simple answer.

'But the people are represented?'

Natalie shook her head.

'Gee! — some oppression!'

Natalie took fire.

'There is no oppression. The throne and the people are one and of one spirit.' She was quoting from the Declaration of the Constitution of Sciriel. 'Sciriens are the happiest people in Europe.'

Mademoiselle Natalie Montressor, only child of the brother of King Raymond of Sciriel, could be very imperious when occasion demanded. At other times she was just an ordinary girl of sixteen — a redoubtable pillow-fighter, in the championship class at lacrosse, and at tennis an opponent to be reckoned with.

Moving in the wake of the little party, Natalie's eyes roamed hither and yon in search of amusement. Sitting on the top of a ladder was a restless little man

daubing away at a copy of a Correggio. She wondered why he did it, and, failing to discover an adequate reason, she fell to wondering if ever, in his enthusiasm, he over balanced and tumbled from the ladder. It was an absurd thought and a smile spread over the grave features of her little face. And thus, with her mouth up at the corners and her eyes full of laughter, she was first seen by, and herself first saw, Nikko Cheyne.

Nikko Cheyne, ever willing to attempt the impossible, was engaged upon a copy of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. He had stepped back from his canvas the better to visualise the enormity of his offence when his eyes fell upon Natalie. She had emerged from behind the canvas and was facing him three paces away. Nikko caught his breath and held it. The arm along which a palette was balanced fell to his side. His eyes and his mouth opened in wonder. Very slowly the smile faded from Natalie's features. But she did not move. There was not so much as the flicker of an eyelid while those two stood in mute wonder — examining and absorbing each other.

Said Mademoiselle Suresme:

'Here is La Joconde. Said by some to be Leonardo's masterpiece. The smile is considered an interesting feature of the picture.'

An interesting feature! Ye gods, yes, so Nikko had thought — the most beautiful and elusive smile in all the world — until this moment.

A shiver ran through Natalie — she drifted a hand across her mouth and forced her eyes to the ground. With a thin hiss Nikko's lungs emptied. His muscles tightened and he strode forward to the easel.

Mademoiselle Suresme went on talking.

'When can I see you again?' said Nikko, and could not recognize his own voice.

Natalie shook her head, half frightened.

'Where — where?' his tone was urgent. 'Don't you understand I must always see you now?'

Natalie's eyes flickered away, came back, met his again.

'I don't know — I'd like — we can't.'

'The background is very nicely painted,' said Mademoiselle Suresme, 'with all those hills and bridges.'

'We must.'

'How can we?'

'Somehow,' said Nikko.

'Let us go now and look at La Source — to me a very charming painting.'

Mademoiselle Suresme gathered her flock about her — patter, patter went their feet over the polished floor.

Nikko Cheyne stood dazed as they passed through an archway and out of sight. At the spot where Natalie had been standing a flash of white caught his eye. He stooped and picked up a handkerchief with a tiny coronet embroidered in one corner. At the sound of a light footstep he turned. It was Natalie. Oddly grave she looked for one so young. She had been shocked perhaps by herself. Words were difficult — she made a gesture toward the handkerchief.

'Oh, you found it, Monsieur.'

'It's yours?'

She nodded.

'Unless you give it to me — I shall keep it,' he said.

The smile came and went.

'Then I must say it was not here.'

'Will you give it to me?'

She thought for a second, and came out honestly with

'I have — I did — when I dropped it — I don't know why.'

'I know,' said he.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'Nicholas Cheyne — Nikko — and you?'

'I have so many names.'

'Give me one.'

She threw a glance over her shoulder.

'Elizabeta, then.'

He repeated it aloud in the tone of an endearment.

'Elizabeta — that's Bettany.'

She caught her breath.

'Is it——'

He nodded and she seemed to hover.

'They'll wonder. I must go.'

'Not until you tell me where I may find you.' His hand had closed about one of hers.

She gave the address and added:

'But I'm at school.'

'It makes no difference,' said Nikko Cheyne.

It was a long address and picking up a brush he wrote it in paint across his copy of the Mona Lisa.

She exclaimed, 'Your picture.'

Nikko shook his head.

'It's the first and only worthy thing I have ever done on canvas.' Then looking up he saw that she had gone.

Nikko Cheyne packed his paint box and shut the lid for the last time. He would never paint again. The great idea had become a living reality that must be given living expression.

In the foyer of the little hotel Rosabelle threw up her hands in amazement, crying:

'The good God and all His Angels — he is in love!'

6

Said a small narrow woman to a broad round man who sat beside her in the clanking, bumping train:

'Look, there is a boy made beautiful by love.'

The man 'honked' like a goose and continued to read the *Echo de Paris*.

'The doors of his emotions are wide open. I am glad to have seen this boy.'

Her husband took a peep over his paper and grunted: 'English.'

'I had forgotten men looked that way,' said the woman sadly. 'Even you — once.'

Nikko Cheyne alighted near the Arc de Triomphe, strode across the Étoile and down a boulevard leading to the Bois. A quarter of a mile farther on he turned into a side street where houses, with railings like tall javelins and wrought-iron gates, stood in their formal gardens.

Night was gathering and from the west a ruby shaft stretched upward across the sky.

There were neither names nor numbers to the houses, but a postman told him where Mademoiselle Suresme's was to be found.

'The last on the left, M'sieur — a white house with blue shutters.'

Nikko thanked him and went on.

With the supreme optimism of a lover he had resolved that there should be nothing underhand in his conduct of the affair. It was no part of his purpose to hang around on the off chance of seeing Bettany again. Great ideas are not to be approached by mean methods. He would present himself to Mademoiselle Suresme, state his case, and demand an introduction. Seeing his sincerity she would hardly dare to refuse. No cause could hope to prosper that was built upon timidity. Of course, if there was opposition he would have to consider other forms of attack, but for the moment courage was his watchword.

The iron gates clanged behind him as he strode across a gravel courtyard and sounded the bell.

An old man in shirt-sleeves with a yellow waistcoat and an apron of green baize opened the door.

'Mademoiselle Suresme,' said Nikko. 'I wish to see Mademoiselle Suresme. You will tell her Nicholas Cheyne of Querne has called.'

It all sounded very fine.

'Monsieur has an appointment?'

'I never give or make appointments,' Nikko replied imperiously. 'Take my message.'

'But, Monsieur ——'

'At once ——'

The old servant hesitated, and Nikko feared he had overdone it. He was enormously relieved when the man stood aside and bade him enter. He was shown into a small apartment furnished in the style of Louis XVI.

'If Monsieur will be seated I will inform Mademoiselle.'

'I prefer to stand.'

The door closed. From a distant part of the house came a ripple of girlish laughter and light voices. For the first time in his life Nikko was afraid.

Ages seemed to pass before the door opened and Mademoiselle Suresme came in. Away from the polite atmosphere of the galleries she appeared to have assumed a more commanding personality. In the chaste confines of her school it was not her habit to offer enthusiastic welcome to strange young men.

Nikko bowed, and as he did so felt his heart pummelling against his ribs.

'Monsieur,' she said and waited for him to begin.

Nikko took a deep breath.

'You do not know me, Mademoiselle.'

'I do not.'

'My name ——'

'The servant gave me your card, but I am no wiser.'

Here was no time for modesty.

'It is a name well known in the west of England,' said he.

'Possibly, but I live in Paris, Monsieur.'

'Just so,' said Nikko lamely.

Mademoiselle assessed him in silence. He was well dressed, handsome, and clearly a gentleman. She adopted a less frigid tone.

'If you would tell me your business.'

'I will — at once ——' and stopped.

'Yes.'

Nikko braced himself.

'You were at the Louvre this morning, Mademoiselle, in company with a young lady, a girl who ——'

'I was there with six young ladies — my pupils.'

'I saw only one,' said Nikko.

Suspicion repossessed Mademoiselle Suresme.

'How does my visit to the Louvre affect you?' she asked.

'It affects me intimately, it affects my whole life. That is why I have come here to implore you to do me the honour of introducing me to ——'

'What is this?' demanded Mademoiselle Suresme angrily. 'To introduce you to whom?'

Nikko made a hopeless gesture. His prepared speeches were falling away from him like a cloak.

'I do not know her name — that is what makes it so hard — but an oval face, Mademoiselle, very little hands — a smile. I can't describe her, she is too — she was wearing grey, fawn grey, with a collar of grey fox. You must know of whom I'm speaking.'

Mademoiselle Suresme's eyes opened in amazement.

'Is Monsieur infatuated?' she cried.

'Yes — yes, I am.'

'Is he mad to come here with such an outrageous request?'

'There's nothing outrageous in wanting — in meaning to know her. I am deceiving no one and I am not a cad, Mademoiselle.'

'But you are most certainly a fool,' was the answer. 'Have you given a moment's reflection to what you ask?'

'I've thought of nothing else since first I saw her.'

'Are you unaware that these young ladies are placed here in my charge by their parents to have their education completed and to be protected from contact with dangerous influences and worldly and unprincipled persons? In all my experience I have never listened to such a shameless demand.'

'I have no cause for shame,' said Nikko hotly.

'More probably you are lost to any instinct of it. I must ask you to leave here at once.'

But Nikko stood his ground.

'Before I go,' said he, 'I insist that you give me the name and address of her parents. Since you refuse to grant me an introduction I must apply to them for leave.'

Mademoiselle Suresme tottered and sank into a chair.

'Young man,' said she, 'have you lost your reason? Have you no appreciation of the impossible?'

'Nothing is impossible where there is love and courage,' said Nikko.

Mademoiselle Suresme looked at him in wonder.

'I am not prepared to discuss that point,' said she, 'but I assure you it is in my power to make what *you* ask impossible.'

'You can only speak for yourself, Mademoiselle.'

For a moment schoolmistress gave place to woman.

'Do you believe yourself in love with Mademoiselle Montressor?'

'I am.'

'In that brief glance?'

'It was long enough.'

'My poor boy!' said the woman, and Nikko had an impression of tears in her eyes. She recovered herself quickly. 'Now listen. This folly must end here and now. Apart from all else, Mademoiselle Montressor belongs to a family into which you — as a commoner — you could never be given an *entrée*.'

Nikko drew himself up.

'My own family,' he said, 'is not obscure. One day I shall be Lord Cheyne of Querne.'

Interest fired in Mademoiselle's eyes, only to die down again. She shook her head.

'You bear yourself like an aristocrat,' she said, 'but my words hold good. In time you may discover the reason for them — but not from me.' She rose and held out a hand. 'Love is always charming, Monsieur, even though at times it is a little bewildering. You have behaved like a foolish boy, but I forgive that, because of the cause. Go away now and forget and so will I.

'Never,' said Nikko.

'At least you will give me your word not to attempt to meet Mademoiselle Montressor — or write to — or follow her.'

Nikko hesitated.

Mademoiselle Suresme's brows straightened.

'Monsieur, you will give me your word?'

'No, Mademoiselle.'

'Monsieur!'

'But I would break it, Mademoiselle.'

Their eyes met in silent challenge.

'I wish you adieu, Monsieur.'

Nikko went out.

For several minutes Mademoiselle Suresme stood wrapped in thought; she rang a bell and gave orders for Natalie to come to her study.

Presently she came — bright-eyed — wondering.

'Natalie,' said Mademoiselle Suresme, 'a young man left this house scarcely a moment ago — an Englishman — tall and with broad shoulders ——'

Natalie gave a gasp and one hand strayed to her throat. Moving swiftly to the window, she parted the curtains, and looked out into the quickening dusk.

'Mother of Mercy!' exclaimed Mademoiselle Suresme and sat down to write a letter to the Prince Carelon of Sciriel.

7

SINCE there is no effective machinery for keeping lovers apart, what followed was inevitable.

For the next few days Nikko Cheyne became as integral a part of the Rue d'Antibes as the houses themselves, the double row of plane trees that shaded the pavements, or the one street lamp that flickered through the hours of the darkness.

To Mademoiselle Suresme he became a nightmare and she seriously considered applying to the police for his removal. But police means publicity, and with such an establishment as hers publicity was to be avoided at all costs.

Nikko counted the day gloriously spent if it afforded him the briefest glimpse of his adored.

Nor was the case of Natalie any the less serious. The power to concentrate upon her studies had forsaken her. Her clear, cool mind had become preoccupied with thought of Nikko. She could think of nothing but his few rapid sentences in the galleries of the Louvre. She

could look for nothing but a sight of his figure moving among the plane trees before the house. Her laughing, buoyant face had become grave and wistful. That she was a princess of the blood royal and that he might be, and probably was, nobody at all did not disturb her conscience. She loved him and he her. Nothing else mattered. But it was agony to both that no further opportunity for speech was afforded them. When Natalie went out to ride in the Bois or visit places of interest, she went under close escort, or in a shut car. Mademoiselle Suresme took no risks. Natalie's possessions were removed from a front first-floor room to one at the back of the house — on the top floor. Her correspondence was censored and three letters from Nikko were solemnly burnt without a word being said about them.

As a result a most distressing and improper scene was enacted. Instinct convinced Natalie that, as they were denied sharing the spoken word, her lover most surely must have written. Why then had she received none of his letters? It was impossible to believe that anyone would dare to interfere with her correspondence — and yet ——

With flaming cheeks and head thrown back she boldly demanded the truth.

Mademoiselle Suresme's position was more than difficult.

'I have acted in accordance with my duty,' she replied.

Natalie flamed. Here was indeed a princess.

'You have tampered with my letters, Mademoiselle.'

'I have eliminated letters which it was undesirable you should read.'

'How dare you, Mademoiselle?' Her voice shook with emotion.

'Natalie, you do not realise what you are saying.'

'I realise I am treated like a servant girl. I shall write to my father to-night.'

'I have already written,' was the quiet reply, 'and until I receive the Prince's reply, I shall control this situation in my own way.'

'I demand my freedom.'

'You are not to be trusted with it. Indeed, after this I shall not permit you to leave the house and grounds.'

Angry tears started in Natalie's eyes. She forced them back.

'I shall go away from here instantly!' she cried. 'I shall give orders for my baggage to be sent at once to an hotel.'

'Natalie, while you are in my charge, it is I by whom orders will be given.'

'You m-make me a prisoner.'

'*Chérie — chérie*,' said Mademoiselle Suresme, 'think — think — think. This foolish hot-headed boy can bring nothing but harm to you. Yours is a royal future. Ask your own dignity.'

'My dignity — you have left me none.' And Natalie ran from the study to fling herself face downward on her bed and sob and sob.

At the sound of a light footstep she sat up and dashed the tears from her eyes. It was the American girl, Veronica, a cheeky-faced little jewel of girlhood with a mop of laughing curls. She fell on her knees beside the bed and kissed Natalie's wet cheeks — saying:

'Poor baby — tell me all about it.'

'It isn't — it can't be wrong to be in love,' said Natalie, the words falling one by one like beads from a broken string.

'If it is, I pray I may die a sinner,' came the answer.

'He's always there — day after day — I don't believe he ever eats anything. It's awful.'

'Let's have the story,' said Veronica.

It was such a little tale to tell, but Veronica realised the immensity of it.

Veronica held very pronounced views on the subject of class distinction. They were epitomised in the laconic word, 'Bunk.'

'There's only men and women in this old world,' said she. 'Kings and queens and the rest are just so much frames and fittings.'

'I know,' said Natalie, who a week earlier would have contested any such statement with her last breath.

'I place crowns in the same class as hair ornaments and I guess I'd allow no hair ornament to put a stricture on my young heart.'

'I don't want to, either.'

'Then what do you want?'

'I want to tell him I love him,' said Natalie.

'And why not?'

'How can I?'

Veronica thought — at last:

'There's me.'

Natalie sat up.

'You mean it?'

'Write a letter now.'

'Yes.' She moved across to her table — sat — picked up a pen and put it down again. 'I couldn't with anyone in the room — not even you.'

'I'll be back then,' said Veronica and went out.

And this was the first love letter written by Princess Natalie Melliora Maria Elizabeta of Sciriel.

NIKKO —

I love you. I can't help it. But they mean to keep us apart. They have stolen your letters to me and burnt them. I have not even the ashes to keep. I have been moved to a room at the back of the house on the top

floor. So now when I look through the window there is no you to see. I am to be made a prisoner and not to go out any more. But there is a little staircase that leads up through a trap door to the roof, and perhaps when everyone is asleep I could creep up there and look down and see you. I shall try to-night. I do love you and I am very unhappy.

BETTANY

A warm glow crept over her cheeks as she wrote for the first time his name for her. She pressed the letter to her mouth, put it in an envelope, and waited.

Veronica peeped in.

'Got through?'

Natalie nodded — kissed Veronica.

'You are kind,' she said. 'I'll never forget.'

The young ladies of the establishment of Mademoiselle Suresme were not permitted to go out alone even to post a letter. This was a rule that was never broken and for that reason it was never anticipated that it would be broken. Clearly, then, since it would be vain to ask for leave that would not be granted, the obvious thing to do was to break the rule openly without fuss or comment. And this was what Veronica did. She opened the front door, marched down the drive, passed through the gates, crossed the road to where Nikko stood buttressing the opposite wall, put the letter in his hand, said, 'Catch hold of this,' and marched back again. She closed the front door with a hearty bang and went upstairs.

On the second landing she was met by Natalie to whom she remarked:

'That's fixed.'

A door beside them opened and a small pigtailed head was extruded. A voice exclaimed in a horrified whisper, '*Oh, quelle honte!* I saw it all.' The head disappeared.

'Jeanne — she'll tell,' said Natalie.

Veronica said:

'Leave this to me.'

Miss Veronica Fladgate, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, entered the apartment of Mademoiselle Jeanne Pigaud, of Toulouse, and presently came forth a sound as of someone stifling. When Veronica came out a few moments later, she said to Natalie:

'I've given the Pig her first lesson in Royalty, and I guess it's left her with more taste for standing than sitting.'

8

NIKKO did not greedily tear open the envelope and read what was within. For the moment it was rapture enough to have it in his keeping. To read her first letter to him out there in the open street would be sacrilege. He broke for the Bois at a run, seeking somewhere under trees to be alone. The delay was torture, but of an exquisite kind. Even when he found the solitude he was seeking, still he delayed and sat pressing the letter between his palms, thrilling at the bare touch of it.

He set himself tasks of endurance. It should remain unopened until that horseman had vanished out of sight. But no! What had an ignorant stranger to do with Bettany that he should exercise control over her written word? Nikko searched imagination for a worthier cause. He would wait until that huge rack of clouds overhead was clear of the sun. The sun should come out for this letter of hers. The sun was a fitting herald.

Slow as time the great cloud travelled onward until about its outer fringe a fillet of gold spread and widened. The sun rode blazing in an empty sky.

Nikko read the letter with every emotion in play. Until that moment he felt he had never been born — had never lived — breathed, felt, or known. She had written 'I love you,' and from that point and impetus life began. Because he was quarter poet, he kissed the page and held it to his face — and because the rest of him was youth in love, he rose and stamped his feet upon the ground and drove his fists into the unresisting air. And then for the honour of chivalry and of true romance he held the letter above his head and swore to his Maker that he would serve this, his lady, to the end of life and after.

And if there be any man in this practical and pedestrian age who, for the reason that we travel in automobiles and have telephones convenient to our hands, and other modern etceteras, will say of chivalry that it is dead or outworn — let us give him pity from the depths of our hearts.

9

The Paris clocks were chiming eleven when Nikko Cheyne, taking advantage of the darkness and of the empty street, climbed the wrought-iron gates and dropped noiselessly into the courtyard. Keeping in the shadows, he skirted the edge of the garden to a narrow shrubbery that flanked on the west of the house. Here was a wall, barren of windows; beside it grew a poplar, rearing its tall spire above the level of the chimneys.

Without a moment's hesitation Nikko embraced the rough trunk of the tree and swarmed upward. It was not an easy climb, since a poplar offers the poorest hold for hand or foot, but to Nikko, buoyed up with love and hope, difficulty did not exist. Imagination had shown him the pathway leading to love and he was too grate-

ful to feel discomfort or to apprehend a danger. The main stem tapered towards the top and swayed this way and that under the various stresses of his weight. He had seen nothing of Bettany — but he had not expected to do so — as she would not risk coming out on the roof until the lights were extinguished and Mademoiselle Suresme and her staff were safely abed.

Up he went — up and up until the branches that supported him were no bigger than little rods of whippy steel. It seemed ages before he had climbed high enough to look down upon the flat lead roof and the low coping that protected it. No one was there. On the farther side were chimney stacks huddled together in black and clotted groups and in the centre of the roof Nikko could descry the outline of the trap-door through which presently Bettany would come to him. From where he stood, plaited among the upper branches, there was a naked space of six feet to the coping. Throwing his weight forward and backward Nikko set the tree-top swaying like the point of a fly rod. It creaked protestingly, but each movement brought him a few inches nearer his mark.

'Next one,' said he. 'I'll chance it at the next.'

Something more gentle than mere chance may have accounted for Bettany's appearance at the very moment he let go and jumped.

She sprang forward with a little cry, catching his hands and dragging him to safety as his feet landed on the narrow coping.

'You — oh, you shouldn't have,' she gasped, and, looking down into the black depths below, turned sharply away and hid her face in his coat.

So they stood clasping one another and he kissed her bright curls upon which the moon was shining.

'My love — oh, my love,' said he, and she echoed

those words — but so muffled that he felt rather than heard them.

Then he took her hand and led her away to the shadows behind the chimney stack, and, spreading out his coat, invited her to sit beside him.

So they sat, side by side, her chin against his shoulder, their fingers intertwined and no word spoken.

Away to the east the great spectre of the Arc de Triomphe rose against the night, washed, as it were, by a sea of roof-tops. The sound of distant traffic drummed in their ears like the music of water beating against rocks.

'I've brought you some flowers, Bettany,' — and when she looked up — 'but we're sitting on them.'

A battered nosegay of crushed lilies-of-the-valley and forget-me-nots was rescued from the breast pocket of his coat, was given and taken and joyed over.

'I shall keep one sprig of forget-me-not and wear it forever,' she whispered, 'and the rest I shall put in a glass and keep up here on the roof, where no one else will ever see them.'

'I shall bring you flowers every night, now,' he promised.

Then they kissed one another with the tender, adoring, passionless kiss of absolute certainty and confidence. Their two young faces pressed together for a breathless second that captured the treasures of eternity.

Said Nikko, and his throat burned and throbbed:

'I've sworn to give up the whole of my life to you, Bettany.'

And she:

'You must, Nikko. I'd die if you didn't.'

After that they were silent.

The roofs glittered and the traffic drummed.

'That climb,' said Bettany, and suddenly shivered. 'I daren't let you climb that awful tree again. If you fell!'

'How could I with you waiting!'

'But you're my lover, Nikko — and if ——'

'No harm could happen to your lover, Bettany; we're saved for each other, you know.'

'Yes,' she nodded, 'we must be — I believe that.'

But a fresh terror awoke.

'How will you get down?'

'Easily,' said he; 'don't worry.'

She rose to her feet, peered over the coping, and came back biting her hand in fear.

'You can't — you won't be able to.'

He laughed to give her confidence.

'Then I must stay here until you leave school and we'll be together for the rest of our lives.'

'Oh, don't laugh, Nikko. Until I loved you, I've never been afraid.'

'It's a simple jump to the branches,' he reassured her. 'Why, I've done heaps worse when I was a kid. To-morrow I'll bring a rope and throw it over one of the chimneys. I'll be safe as houses.'

'Aren't you afraid?'

'Only for you,' he answered. 'You were brave to come, Bettany.'

'I had to come.'

'So had I — the way doesn't matter — only being here matters. Sit beside me again.'

There was comfort in his arm round her shoulders — in the pressure of his cheek against hers.

'Are you happy because of me, Nikko?'

'Happy,' he echoed.

A grown-up thought troubled her — a jealous thought.

'But your art — perhaps one day you'll get tired of me — forget me in your art.'

'I have no art. That's done,' said he. 'I was looking for something beautiful, that was all — but I would never have found it in art, Bettany. I've found it in you.'

The stars were in her eyes.

'Nikko, you say all the things — the lovely things — I used to dream I should hear.'

'Even in dreams there was no one like you, Bettany.'

'I'm happy, happy, happy,' she said, shut her eyes, snuggled close, and was soft in his arms.

And so for a while until a chorus of clocks chimed midnight.

Bettany sat up, blinked, and rubbed her face.

'I mustn't stay any longer — someone might come to my room, perhaps — if we were found and stopped from meeting again I couldn't bear it.'

'Yes,' he nodded. 'I'll go now. Good-night, Bettany.'

She shook her head.

'I shall watch you go.'

'No, dear, please.'

'I shall watch you go. Do you think I could sleep without being sure?'

'There's no danger.'

'But I shall watch,' she said again. 'Be careful, Nikko, for if you fall I shall jump off the roof. Kiss me good-night.'

He took her in his arms.

'Till to-morrow,' he said, mounted the coping and leapt outward. The top of the poplar bent like a bow and straightened. Twigs and small branches swished and snapped like a rattle of distant rifle fire. Nikko

paused a moment to wave a farewell and vanished hand under hand into the shadows of the garden below.

Bettany waited motionless until she heard the faint rasping of his feet dying away along the road and then on wings floated down the ladder and lowered the trapdoor above her head.

10

For three nights Nikko and Bettany spent their wonder hour among the chimney pots. And in those hours, the love they bore each other flowered and ripened and possessed them. Under all the skies was no other world of heaven than theirs. So completely had they accepted each other that they asked no questions and were content to sit side by side sharing the intimacy of long silences, or speaking just such words as were needed for telling the story of their feelings.

Simple, happy, tender hours, whose joys were magnified by hazard into an importance beyond the worth of any other affection chronicled by man.

They were concerned only with their love for each other. Birth, nationality, their different places in the world's scheme found no place even in the fringes of their talk. To him she was Bettany — his sweetheart — the girl to whom he had dedicated his whole life. He neither knew, nor had he known would have cared, that she was a princess of the blood royal. What he felt for her was too great to be awed by title or position.

Bettany had told him nothing of herself, but there was no deceit in her withholding. Time was too brief to be wasted in an exchange of fiddling details. There was no future but the future they would make for and share with each other and in that future obstacles did not exist. If here and there a jungle or a crevasse was

strung across the path, their love was strong enough to trample it down or make the leap.

It was the leap towards which Bettany's mind always reverted with a jar. The nightly terror of seeing Nikko spring across space into the little branches. The sickening sag and sway of the tree-top was a torture she could hardly bear. By day she would reproach her wicked selfishness in wanting him so greatly that she lacked the will power to forbid him to come by that perilous route. But when night came and the hour of their meeting was at hand, fear was lost in the joy of expectation. She would catch him in her arms and forget everything.

Nikko did not bring a rope. He had no mind to smooth dangers from his path. He gloried in the thrill of risking his neck to be with her. It was a kind of service, a tribute and a loyalty of which caution would have robbed him. Boylike he saw in Bettany too great a wonder to approach up a flight of common stairs. The poplar — the grimy roof — the little jam jars which held his nightly offerings of flowers, all were parts of the palace built by and for their love. Their courtship was up on high among the stars — was above the heads of the dim earthy couples who wandered and clung to one another in the shadow of the trees below.

So the wonder nights came and went and came again, one, two, and three.

'Until to-morrow,' said Nikko, and kissed her hands, looked up and saw that she was crying.

'What is it?' he asked.

But she shook her head.

'Tell me.'

'I don't know, Nikko. It's being so happy — it's being afraid of being so happy.'

'How can you be afraid of that?'

Again she shook her head.

'I don't know — but it comes over me every now and then — that each time you go away may be the last time.'

'How can you believe that?' he asked reproachfully. 'Don't you know that if I were carried to the ends of the world I'd come back to you?'

'You mean that, don't you?'

'With all my heart and soul — so long as you want me, Bettany.'

'That's always,' she said and, clenching her hands, beat them against his chest. 'Always — always — always.'

He caught her wrists and answered fiercely:

'If ever I prove unworthy of you may I be struck dead.'

Then he kissed her and was gone. Bettany watched his face flickering downward through the branches until it was lost to view. She heard a soft thud as his feet touched the ground followed by a swift exclamation of surprise.

A voice, harsh and strident, said:

'Keep still or find a bullet in your stomach. Hands out — now.'

Then from Nikko:

'But Monsieur le Gendarme ——'

'Hands out!'

There was a sharp click as the handcuff bar locked home.

'So! That's better — and what have you taken, my pretty thief, eh?'

'Nothing,' said Nikko.

'And was it for nothing you jumped from the roof to the tree-top?'

'I — yes — no,' he stammered — stopped and went

on again: 'You may as well know the truth. I climbed to the roof in the hope of getting into the house, but I could find no way.'

'And what did you expect to find in the house?'

Again a pause.

'It is a good house,' said Nikko doggedly. 'There might have been jewellery — lying about.'

Bettany smothered a half-cry and ran to the trap-door. He was shielding her — shielding her. She had but one thought, to reach the garden and tell the truth.

Careless of all else she clattered down the wooden steps and raced to the head of the staircase. A passage door crashed noisily behind her. Her feet rattled like castanets on the polished stairs. On the last landing a door was flung open and Mademoiselle Suresme stepped out.

'Natalie, you — and dressed — what is the meaning ——?'

Natalie tried to break past, but Mademoiselle Suresme barred the way.

'Let me go — I must — I must!' she wailed.

But Mademoiselle Suresme was strong and wiry and threw her arms about the little princess and held her fast.

'My lover — he is there — oh, let me go, Mademoiselle — I beg — I implore. He has been arrested as a burglar by a gendarme. He came to see me — I swear it's true — we were together ——'

'Together, where?'

'On the roof. They'll take him away and ——'

'Merciful mother,' cried Mademoiselle Suresme, 'is this true, child?'

'Yes, yes, I swear — he was climbing down the tree.'

Mademoiselle Suresme's citadel tottered above her head. The unimaginable — the impossible — had

come to pass — a calamity too terrible to envisage — a calamity upon whose rocks the carefully built-up reputation of a lifetime would inevitably be shattered.

From below came the clanging of a bell and a voice cried:

'Open to the police.'

Mademoiselle Suresme stiffened like a rod.

'Go into that room,' she said, 'and do not move until I come for you. Go!' And, lending force to words, she took the weeping child by the arm, thrust her within, and locked the door on the outside.

Then she went downstairs and admitted Nikko and the gendarme.

'Why am I disturbed at this hour?' she asked coldly.

'For the reason that I collared this fine fellow climbing down from your roof, Madame.'

'But that is impossible.'

'He has the agility of a cat. He jumped from the coping to the tree-top. I saw him with my own eyes.'

Mademoiselle looked at Nikko, but Nikko did not betray the slightest gleam of recognition.

'His face,' she said, 'is unfamiliar to me. I do not see how he can have made his way into the house.'

'I did not, Madame,' said Nikko. 'I tried to enter, but failed.'

'So they all say,' said the gendarme, 'but surely there is a trap-door. By your leave, I will take a look at that.'

Mademoiselle Suresme held up a hand.

'My house is full of young ladies. It would not be discreet and would cause alarm for a man to visit the upstairs rooms at so late an hour. If you will wait in here I will look at the trap-door myself.'

In company with the gendarme, Nikko found him-

self once more in the small apartment in which his first interview with Mademoiselle Suresme had taken place. While they waited, the gendarme made an expert examination of Nikko's pockets. The result depressed him.

Mademoiselle Suresme's face was a pattern of composure when she returned.

'The trap-door is double-bolted,' she said. 'The young man speaks the truth.'

'Then I shall take him to the police station and he will be charged with attempted burglary.'

'Does he understand his position?' asked Mademoiselle Suresme. 'From his appearance I would say he is an Englishman.'

'A foreigner — but he speaks tolerably well, Madame.'

'You do not speak English yourself, Monsieur?'

'Not a word.'

'He may have some explanation to offer. May I ask him in his own tongue?'

'But surely.'

'Have you any explanation, Monsieur?' she asked Nikko, speaking rapidly in English.

'I think it is simpler to leave things as they are,' he answered slowly.

'It will mean prison for you.'

'I suppose so.'

'You are prepared to face that?'

'I have no choice.'

'But you have.'

'None that I could take,' he amended.

Mademoiselle Suresme pressed a hand to her lips.

'Would you think it my duty to help you by telling the truth?'

Nikko shook his head.

'No, Madame.'

'You are a gentleman — but why did you do this thing?'

'We cannot be kept apart,' he answered simply.

She looked for a moment into a pair of eyes that were frank, innocent, and steadfast, and suddenly she was proud to have known this boy whose chivalry was strong enough to bear the brunt of any disaster, that the girl he loved might be cleared of suspicion.

'What says he?' grunted the gendarme.

'That he tried and failed,' was the slow reply.

The gendarme tapped Nikko on the shoulder.

'Come,' said he.

Mademoiselle Suresme shut and bolted the heavy door behind them and mounted the stairs to the room where Natalie waited.

'My lover, Mademoiselle,' gasped Natalie. 'You saw him — you had him set free?'

'You have no lover,' she answered.

'Mademoiselle!' The voice was pitched high in anguish.

'I saw no one but a gendarme and a rash young man who tried to break into my house like a robber.'

Natalie's eyes were wide with horror.

'But you told the gendarme the truth?'

'There was no need. The young man had already confessed.'

'Then I shall go to him — now — to the police. They shall hear everything.'

'You forget,' was the ominous reply; 'you too are a prisoner, Natalie.'

'I shall cry if from the house-tops.'

'The roof will be closed,' said Mademoiselle Suresme, and caught the half-fainting girl in her arms.

Before she went to bed that night Mademoiselle

Suresme stole up to the roof and stood there in the pale moonlight. By the chimney stack she found the three bunches of flowers Nikko had brought, each in its separate jar. She took them out and raised her hand as though to scatter them upon the garden below. But a gentler impulse stayed the action and, gathering them together in a single bunch, she descended through the trap-door and came quietly into the room where Natalie lay weeping upon her pillow.

'For comfort, my dear,' she said, and laid the flowers beside the buried face.

II

THE bright jewellery of dawn was in the sky when the train which bore Baron Vilasto, Chamberlain to the household of Prince Carelon and honoured counsellor to King Raymond of Sciriel, steamed slowly into the station of Montparnasse.

Baron Vilasto's deeply bronzed colouring was emphasised by snow-white hair, and a sweeping white moustache. He was of great height and superb carriage, even though his eighty-four years of life had put upon his shoulders the burden of a slight stoop. His voice, in whatever language he talked, and there were few he had not mastered, was smooth, calm, and resonant. He talked as he walked, with distinction. Further, he had a smile and a way — and left in the minds of persons with whom he came in contact a pleasant flavour — a bouquet as from an old wine.

Not because his eyesight was failing, but for the reason that he was a lover of things delicate of sound and to the touch, he held to his ear an old gold repeater and let it chime the silvery hours and minutes to him: six hours and fifteen minutes.

He stepped upon the platform and smiled a greeting

to his Scirien valet, who, surrounded by suitcases, was already at the carriage door.

'Since the train is three hours late,' said he, 'you will take the baggage to the hotel and I shall drive direct to the Rue d'Antibes. You will order lunch for myself and Princess Natalie in my private room. A sole — wild duck — orange salad — and a *soufflé*. You will tell the *chef* to decorate the *soufflé* with the Princess's first name. We shall lunch at half-past twelve. And now a taxi, please.'

Compared with the grey faces and tousled heads of the majority of the passengers who thronged the platform at that early hour, old Baron Vilasto looked like a rosy-cheeked schoolboy. He had shaved on the train, his huge black satin cravat was precise and orderly, his linen immaculate. The circular cape, with its lining of crimson corded silk, hung from his shoulders in creaseless folds.

As the taxi moved away he nodded farewell to his servant and settled back on the cushions, a white-gloved hand resting on the knob of an ebony cane.

There is no more beautiful city than Paris when seen in the pale silences of early morning. Baron Vilasto, despite the delicacy of the task that was before him, smiled contentedly. He did not believe in approaching difficulties with a face of gloom. His lifelong policy had been to smile his way through defences into favour. After winning his opponent's confidence, experience had proved that right would usually prevail.

He was unlike his master, Prince Carelon, who, on receipt of Mademoiselle Suresme's letter, had stormed and raved and beaten the air with the traditional and temperamental rashness for which he was famous.

The Baron's methods were humane and conciliatory. He had made a study of the world and the emotions of

men and women and he knew that sentiment is not driven out of the system by harsh words and threatenings. Therefore he smiled, and was still smiling when the taxi drew up before Mademoiselle Suresme's house and the chauffeur set the great bell clanging.

Baron Vilasto was shown into the salon, and when Mademoiselle fluttered in, he was sniffing at and smiling over a single carnation which he had taken from a vase.

'A distressing indifference to the time-table on the part of those responsible for running the trains is the excuse for presenting myself at this outrageous hour,' said he. 'We arrived so late, and consequently so early, that I abandoned the intention of first visiting the hotel. Mademoiselle, I salute you,' and stooping he brushed her fingers with his lips.

'Thank God you have come, Monsieur le Baron,' she replied, 'for things have happened this night which even in a nightmare I would have believed impossible.'

Baron Vilasto shook his head.

'Surely not,' said he. 'An indiscretion, perhaps, but we who have reached the season of life where indiscretions are rare are apt to magnify these matters out of their proportion.'

'Monsieur le Baron, I will tell you everything.'

And this without exaggeration or concealment she did. Baron Vilasto allowed the story to proceed without interruption.

At the part which dealt with the hours spent by the lovers on the roof-top, his brows had moved restlessly and he caught a film of skin from his lower lip between close-shut teeth. But he kept his silence until the end. At the end he nodded briskly.

'Mademoiselle,' he said, 'let me hasten to say that I hold you innocent of all blame. Indeed, in the whole

affair I find it hard to blame anyone. The young man, Nicholas Cheyne, has proved himself a gallant and chivalrous lover and our little princess is guilty of no greater sin than following the dictates of her heart. That she cannot be allowed to do so is a tragedy with which persons of royal birth are all too familiar. The princess will return with me to Sciriel to-night. In her own country, with the landscape of what one day will be her future responsibility spread before her, I have hopes that this very natural madness will be forgotten. As to the young man, Cheyne, who will be an English lord, you say, steps must be taken at once to bring about his release. It is unthinkable that such a boy should go through life overshadowed by the stigma of a vulgar crime he has not committed. I will attend to that myself and immediately. Will you, Mademoiselle, see that Princess Natalie is escorted to my suite at the Crillon, where I shall await her at half-past twelve?'

He rose and held out a hand.

'I regret that her education under your careful guidance is to terminate so abruptly, but you, I am sure, will appreciate the necessity. I myself have a granddaughter who is at present studying in Florence, but I hope you may perhaps be able to find a vacancy for her next term.'

'Monsieur le Baron, how can I ——'

'Please, Mademoiselle! I have much to do — my taxi is at the door ticking up ha'pence — and we Sciriens are a thrifty people. I have the honour.' He bowed — kissed her hand, and took his departure, tipping the concierge generously as he passed out.

12

It is unknown by what means Baron Vilasto brought about the release of Nikko Cheyne. He was a states-

man of singular charm and address, and even though the country from which he hailed was but a dot — a beauty spot upon the face of Europe — he was known and respected by the governing classes of the Great Powers. Persons in high places were glad to win a smile from the old man, and would sometimes stretch a legal, or even an international, point to do so.

Perhaps the Baron told the truth. It may be so, for in diplomatic circles truth is no sooner heard than forgotten. The method does not matter; it only remains to be said that he succeeded and presented himself with the necessary authority at the gendarmerie.

While waiting for Nikko to be brought from his cell, the Baron engaged the chief in light conversation.

'I am here,' he said, 'to collect a conceited young man who made a boast that he could outwit the police and steal a garter from any house in the city. The jest from his point of view has proved a grim one. It is a comfort to rest assured that owing to your admirable administration we are secure from the raids even of innocent persons. Unofficially may I be permitted to leave this note as a symbol of my respect?'

Unofficially the note was accepted.

After his night in the lock-up, Nikko presented a wild-eyed and unbrushed appearance.

Baron Vilasto stepped up and wrung him warmly by the hand.

'Come,' he said, 'a taxi waits us, and I am eager for coffee and a *brioche*. Good-day, gentlemen.'

Nikko was swept into the taxi and found himself planted beside the white-haired stranger who seemed to have taken charge of his destiny.

'Who are you,' he asked, speaking in French, 'and why have I been released?'

'It is so long since I talked in English,' was the reply,

'that it would be a pleasure to do so, Mr. Cheyne.'

'Then why have I been released, sir?'

'Because though love may be an indiscretion, it is not a crime.'

Nikko half-rose.

'But I deny ——'

'Tush, tush,' the Baron interposed. 'Save for myself and one other, your secret is still a secret.'

Nikko sank back in silence, but his eyes under dropped brows were flashing enquiries.

'We must have a long talk, Cheyne. Where shall it be — at your lodging or at mine?'

'Where you will, sir. At yours, perhaps. There are a great many stairs to my room.'

'A thoughtful reason,' the Baron nodded. 'As an old man, I am no lover of stairs.' He put his head through the window and addressed the chauffeur. 'To the Crillon.'

Nikko hesitated — then:

'In fairness, sir, you should understand that nothing you may say will alter my feelings for Mademoiselle Montressor.'

Baron Vilasto nodded.

'I would neither ask nor expect that,' said he. 'We cannot alter our feelings either by self-will or at the dictation of other persons. But our conduct inspired by these feelings may sometimes be modified. However, a taxi is the worst place in the world for a discussion.'

The rest of the journey passed in silence. At the Crillon they ascended to the Baron's suite in a lift.

'I have been travelling for three days and nights, Cheyne, and a change of clothes attracts me. You, too, after your unpleasant experience would perhaps enjoy a shave — a bath and the comfort of a dressing-gown.'

Boylike Nikko answered:

'I'm in a frightful mess, I'm afraid.'

'Then half an hour to relax. My man will attend you.'

It was very soothing to be shaved by the dexterous silk-fingered Scirien and afterwards to luxuriate in a steaming hot bath and to feel the twitch and stiffness relax from overstrained nerves. It was delightful, too, to put on a clean soft shirt that had been laid out for him.

But that there was no room in his mind for any thought other than Bettany, Nikko would have been bewildered by the whole business. As it was he accepted it as part of a strange and inexplicable chain of circumstances with which the accident of love had confused him.

When he reëntered the salon, Baron Vilasto was already at a table upon which were laid shining coffee-pots and dishes.

The old man greeted him with a delightful smile.

'Come, now,' he said, 'isn't that better? Are you not relaxed? It is a sad thing to wear an overnight face in the early morning.'

He filled Nikko's cup and indicated a dish of bacon and eggs.

'I did not dare order any other fare for an English guest. We of Sciriel only peck after the Continental fashion at this hour.'

'Thanks, but I'm not hungry, sir,' said Nikko.

Nevertheless he swallowed some food and felt the better for it.

When the covers were cleared away, the Baron gave orders that they were not to be disturbed. Moving two chairs into the sunlight he bade Nikko be seated and put cigarettes at his elbow.

'And now,' said he, 'let us talk freely and without

restraint. I know your name, as you will have noticed, but you are a stranger to mine. I am Baron Sidimir Vilasto, master of the household of Prince Carelon, Grand Duke of Montressor, which is a department of Sciriel.'

'Montressor,' Nikko echoed.

'Yes. The prince is the father of Natalie Melliora Maria Elizabeta.'

'Elizabeta — Bettany!'

The old man's face twitched into his magic smile.

'Bettany? Ah, your name for her. To me she is Princess Natalie.'

Nikko's mouth half-opened and closed again. He did not trust himself to speak.

'Go on,' said he. 'I did not know of this, but — go on.'

'You have heard of Sciriel?'

'No — yes — as a name, sir. I was always a fool at geography.'

'And yet we are a country of some thousand square miles — and half a million population. We are not unmentioned in the history of Central Europe.'

Nikko moved uneasily in his chair.

Baron Vilasto went on.

'You will remember perhaps, how one of Napoleon's divisions, weary of war after the disastrous adventure of Moscow, broke away *en bloc* from the retreating army and striking south went across the Carpathians and plains of Hungary, and passing through the San Jak of Gouri Bazar, came at last to Sciriel and settled there. Stamping out the Moslem influences, feuds, internecine strife, and civil wars which had wrought such continual havoc with us, they restored the ancient royal line and founded the basis of what is to-day one of the happiest, most prosperous, most self-contained

states in all Europe. You need not reproach yourself with ignorance, Cheyne, for it is not the contented peoples of this earth who force a way into the newspapers and the talk of foreign nations. We are of that happy condition, a self-supporting state, living and prospering on the natural products and resources of a fertile soil and of willing service. We do not quarrel with our neighbours after the fashion of all too many Balkan States, nor do we intrude in their hasty quarrels with each other. Nature has guarded our frontiers with rugged mountain ranges, forests, and roaring torrents. We live secure and not in the shadow of war. But though we are thus protected against the dangers of raid or invasion, we Sciriens are neither a fat nor an easy nation. Our love of country runs high — our patriotism is second to none. We are constant in love, but swift to take offence, and our personal honour and dignity we defend in the old and gentlemanly fashion — at the point of a sword.'

He looked up and saw that Nikko's hands were opening and shutting, and that he was biting his lip with a kind of nervous restraint.

'You must stop me, Cheyne, if in my enthusiasm I am led into an old man's failing of being a trifle long-winded.'

'No, sir,' said Nikko. 'Go on.'

'With the coming of the French at the close of 1812, as I have said, there started for Sciriel a new and better form of life and government than she had ever known before. A system of education was introduced; schools and gymnasia were started in every town and village. At our capital, Djevo, there is a university which would bring credit even to a Great Power. To-day, French is almost entirely spoken — having superseded the old Serbo-Crotean language which previously was

in common use. We have advanced with the times to a graceful standard of living and we are very wary to avoid the error of slipping back into the slough where once we wallowed.'

Nikko could stand no more. Throwing his cigarette into the grate, he sprang to his feet.

'What has all this to do with me, sir?' he demanded.

'Nothing,' said the Baron smoothly. 'Nothing at all, my dear young friend, nor can have aught to do with you.'

Nikko's eyes narrowed dangerously.

'If you mean by that ——'

Vilasto held up a hand.

'Bear with me a little longer and I will try to show you why. The whole fabric and edifice of Sciriel has been woven and is supported by the throne and a theory, false or otherwise, in the divine rightness of our royal rulers. The throne is the government and the inspiration of our country. Our constitution is built upon faith in the Royal House. Listen! In the veins of Montressor runs the blood of Europe's oldest royalty. It is blended by the princes of twenty nations. There is in it a strain of English Stuarts, of the Bourbons of France, and many others with which I will not weary you. You, yourself, are a man of too old a lineage, Nicholas Cheyne, for the need to arise for me to emphasise the significance this question of blood assumes in the eyes of the common herd. The name of Montressor is like a magic working among our people, and if from time to time, as happens, that magic may have worn a uniform somewhat black and shoddy, the defect has passed unseen by reason of the name of its wearer.'

Nikko began to speak very swiftly, but without raising his voice Baron Vilasto drove him back to silence.

'In the heat of passion and of ardour — in the strong light of devotion — young people lose track of vital issues. What I have contended is susceptible to argument and possibly even to ridicule, but its simple truth remains. None but a Montressor could ever hold the throne of Sciriel, nor would the people countenance the intermarriage of a throne heir to a person other than of royal stock.'

'Sir,' said Nikko, 'this is statesman's talk. We love one another, Natalie and I. If she were the Queen of — of the Universe, it would not stop her belonging to me.'

The smile still played about the Baron's mouth, but he tapped the table-top with the least shade of irritation.

'Let us avoid extravagant phrases,' he said. 'I am paying you the compliment of taking you very seriously.'

'Seriously! How else could I — could we — be taken?'

'In a variety of ways which I leave to your imagination. How old are you?'

Nikko hesitated.

'I shall be twenty next year.'

'Not yet of age, and only a boy would add a year to his total.'

'Boyhood or manhood is not all to do with years,' said Nikko, flushing.

'Agreed; but only a boy would so readily accept and face the impossible.'

'Impossible?'

'Ten minutes ago you were unaware of the identity of Natalie. Yet you accept the fact that she is a princess as lightly as you might accept a handful of confetti, that settles and is blown away.'

Nikko clasped his hands so that the knuckles shone white.

'Why not, sir? Our love has nothing to do with title or position. It belongs to ourselves.'

Vilasto nodded.

'But how do those stand who cannot claim to belong to themselves?'

'I don't understand.'

'Those who belong to their title or position, who are ruled by the foreordained responsibility of birth.'

Nikko moved uneasily.

'But the world has grown up — is ahead of such old conventions — in America ——'

'The argument of convenience will not avail you, Cheyne. The world is many worlds and is governed by many rules and codes — not by one.'

'But there are other princes and princesses of Sciriel.'

'Alas! there is none. The king is childless. Prince Carelon, his brother, is a widower and has but one daughter, Natalie. In her the future of the line reposes.'

A black spectre rose up before Nikko, blotting out the light.

'That isn't true,' he cried brokenly.

Baron Vilasto said nothing.

Like a caged animal, Nikko strode from wall to wall of the little salon. Suddenly he turned and said wildly:

'But I need her — we need each other. Nothing — nothing shall keep us apart.'

'By which you mean you refuse to abandon hope, Cheyne?'

'Hope!' he echoed. 'Something more real than hope. Call me a boy—a fool—what you will, but Bettany shall be mine, I tell you, in spite of everything.'

For the first time the kindliness waned from the old man's features.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'it is not in my power to offer you the kingdom of Sciriel, even though you propose to — snatch it.'

The fire of enthusiasm died out of Nikko's eyes and his body went limp.

'This morning when first I heard of you, it was of a youth whose chivalry was strong enough to accept imprisonment rather than allow his lady's name to be smirched with scandal. Instead, I find just an average selfish young man whose love is not strong enough to keep him from an act which, were it to be realised, would mean the ruin of a whole state and the inevitable contempt of the woman in whose service he had boasted enlistment.'

Nikko Cheyne moved to the window, and, resting his forehead against the cool glass, shut his eyes in agony.

'What am I to do?' he whispered, and it was more to himself than to Vilasto, he put the question. 'Oh, God, what am I to do? Is love like ours given us to be wasted and thrown away?'

The old man moved to his side and slid an arm gently across his bent shoulders.

'Neither wasted nor thrown away,' said he. 'It is not the greedy ones of this earth who are remembered, but those who were not afraid to sacrifice themselves for an ideal — or as Virgil would put it — for the good of the hive.'

A sudden rebellion of the blood flung back the retort:

'I am not made of martyr stuff.'

'Are you sure? A great idea needs getting used to.'

The words 'a great idea' — with its echo of what the

Master Jean-Jacques Ribot had said — set Nikko's imagination stirring along a broader, braver path. Here was the same lesson applied to a wider canvas than any he had daubed at with mismated pigments. It was applied to himself — and the whole future. His arms went out in a hopeless gesture.

'I swore to serve her, sir, with the last drop of my blood.'

Baron Vilasto drew a breath of free air.

'And you will keep that oath.'

'Would it be kept by standing aside?'

'Ask yourself.'

'Yes — you're right,' said Nikko and suddenly buried his face in the crook of his arm. 'I didn't want to lose her —— I didn't want to lose her.'

It was a boy crying — or a man with a broken heart — that Baron Vilasto took to his breast.

'I should have been proud of a son like you,' he said, and his voice was soft as a mother's. 'Courage is the most beautiful of all the virtues.'

For long minutes they stayed so, old and young, united by a bond of sympathy. Through the tortured brain of Nikko Cheyne roared the winds of an empty world. After a while he sniffed and straightened his head.

'Sorry, sir; behaved like a child. Thank you for putting up with me. I'd better clear out. You have nothing to fear from me any longer. If I might be allowed to write just once.'

'No, not to write,' said Vilasto, 'but to be my guest at luncheon. She will be here and two such friends should not part without a meeting.'

Nikko shook his head.

'I daren't,' he said. 'If I saw her again — no, I daren't.'

''Pon my soul, Cheyne,' said Vilasto, 'I believe I know you better than you know yourself. Of course you will come. The Princess would wish it. You would not disobey a royal command.'

'Very well, sir.'

'In the meantime, why not a walk? See how pleasantly the sunlight plays upon the Champs Elysées.'

Nikko picked up a hat and stumbled from the room.

13

Nikko and Natalie were silent at luncheon, and but for their host's ripple of conversation it is doubtful if a word would have been spoken.

Vilasto talked of painting, great soldiers, his love of gardens, flowers, and open spaces. Fluently, softly, and easily he talked and his voice was like a 'cello playing in some distant place. And while he talked the boy and girl left their food untouched and looked at each other with eyes that were storing remembrances.

Before Nikko's return, Vilasto had pleaded with the little Princess, holding her hands.

'Not for myself — not for the good of our people — not even for your sense of duty, but because the boy knew it was right — because his love is strong enough to stand aside — I plead with you ——'

In the end he had prevailed.

When Nikko came, he had bowed over her hand — kissing the fingers of Princess Natalie like a subject — and Bettany was no more.

Vilasto did not leave them alone together — his faith in love was too strong to take that risk; but after luncheon he moved to a corner of the room and made pretence of examining a time-table.

Then it was she whispered:

'I did wrong. I ought to have told you — I had forgotten everything, you see.'

'You couldn't do wrong, Princess,' he said huskily. 'Never, never.' Then added, 'And now you must forget everything again.'

'Will you?'

He hesitated.

'That's different, Princess. With me there's no need to forget — it doesn't matter.'

'I shall always think of you,' she said, in a slow, small voice, 'climbing up to me, Nikko, and the jump.'

They were dangerously near breaking down the rickety defences.

'The train is at three o'clock, Madam,' said Vilasto, 'if that will be convenient. We can change into a connection at Basle.'

'I am ready,' said Natalie.

'I gave instructions for a car to be in waiting.' He held the gold repeater to his ear. 'If it would not be too early to start.'

Natalie rose. Nikko held out her coat. For an instant their fingers met, clutched desperately, and drifted apart.

'You will give us your company to the station, Cheyne.'

'Yes, Monsieur le Baron.'

Vilasto shook his head.

'Monsieur le Baron,' he said, 'is a person who washes bottles in a royal household. To-day let us leave him there. For the few minutes that remain to us, if you do not feel too sourly toward me, I should be proud if you would call me Vilasto, or even, as you English have it, "old chap."'

Outside the station Nikko bought an armful of

flowers and put them in the private compartment Vilasto had secured.

Passers-by wondered why the girl at the window and the boy upon the platform were so white and silent.

The guard raised his hand — a whistle was blown.

'Good-bye, sir,' said Nikko; then raising his eyes, 'Good-bye, Princess.'

'Bettany,' she pleaded and her voice snapped like a broken violin string. 'Oh, Nikko! Bettany, for the last time.'

But Nikko shut his mouth and stood like a rock.

The couplings wrangled — tightened. From the engine came the 'Tchah! Tchah!' of released steam. Slowly the train began to move — farther — farther — down the platform.

It was going now — carrying her away forever with gathering speed. But still Nikko stood like one riveted to the ground. Then something — an intolerable restraint that held him — broke loose. Racing forward he leapt upon the running-board, clambered up and seizing Natalie's hand, smothered it with kisses. A porter yelled. Their white faces brushed together and Nikko dropped lightly to the line. The train gathered speed and swung round a curve. The face at the window was gone.

A cry started from the throat of the little Princess.

'You've killed my life — killed my life!'

Dropping, she beat the seat cushions with shut hands, then pitched face downward into a cloud of choking dust.

14

Hands sunk in his pockets, blindly unconscious of what was taking place about him, Nikko Cheyne walked

through the streets of Paris. Sometimes he blundered into passers-by, who cursed him for a tipsy, ill-mannered foreigner — tram-bells clanged — lorries and cars hooted and croaked warnings that he neither heard nor heeded. The world was empty — was a void through which he walked doggedly, aimlessly, without hope or interest. In the Rue Saint-Dominique a *poilu* mounted on a bicycle crashed into him and went sprawling across the cobbles.

'Dog of a dog,' cried the *poilu*, 'to hell with all such fools!' Then pointed, 'And there's the gate.'

Strung in large characters across a barren wall were the words, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.'

Nikko looked at them stupidly as the *poilu* picked up his machine and limped away. Beneath the old Republican slogan was a poster.

BUREAU DE RECRUTEMENT POUR LA LÉGION ÉTRANGÈRE

An arrow pointed up the street. With a faint stirring of interest Nikko followed its direction with his eyes.

'To hell with all such fools, and there's the gate.' A shabby iron gate to a mean and shabby house before whose front wall leaned and loafed mean and shabby men. The recruiting office of the Foreign Legion! Nikko stopped for no longer than a man might take to light a cigarette, then stiffened, pushed the gate back on its rusty hinges, and, passing the group of idlers, walked through swing doors into the house.

Before him ran a deserted passage from the far end of which came a rumble of voices.

A door was pushed open and a thick-set Hunnish-looking individual staggered out, licking his lips and wiping his forehead with the back of an unclean hand.

Seeing Nikko, he said in a scared voice, 'I've done it,' and stumbled by into the street.

Nikko pushed open the door through which the man had left.

An N.C.O. in uniform seated at a table stared at him with insolent contempt, tilted back his chair, and enquired:

'What do you want, boy?'

'I don't know — to enlist, I suppose,' Nikko replied numbly.

'Suppose! Hadn't you best get back to the cradle till you've found out?'

'I've found out.'

'The Foreign Legion is not a *crèche*,' said the N.C.O.

A spark of Nikko's old spirit flashed up in him.

'Monsieur's interests are centred in the nursery — he should have been governess and not a soldier. Is there no one here to enlist me?'

'Of a truth there is,' said the N.C.O. grimly. 'Follow me, my young friend, and I will put you in the way of wishing you had never been born.'

15

PASSED fit for service in the Foreign Legion, Nikko walked back toward his hotel through the quiet dusk.

He would have liked to complete his enlistment then and there, but the authorities show one mercy to unwary recruits. They are warned of the hardships they will be called upon to face and are given a night to think it over.

'But, Monsieur le Colonel,' Nikko had protested, 'I am ready. My mind is made up.'

The old soldier had creased the network of lines about his eyes to peer at the boy upon whose face tragedy had set its stamp.

'Minds have been known to change after sleep,' he

said. 'Consider! You have a better future than this.'

'I have no future,' was the simple answer, and Nikko meant every word. The Foreign Legion had opened its doors to him and he entered them willingly — eagerly — as a broken-hearted girl flies to the sanctuary of a convent — to seek forgetfulness of an unkind world.

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders and passed him on for medical examination.

'Return to-morrow, then,' said he.

'I give my word I will,' said Nikko.

As he walked homeward the pain over his heart felt easier. No misgivings troubled him as to the step he had taken. Life offered him no further interest and was better spent among hardships and dangers. With the Legion there would be little leisure for regret and no risk of reacting to the terrible urge that he knew would possess him to cross the continent in search of Bettany. That chapter of his life was closed — finally — and a new one opened.

As he entered the foyer of his hotel, Rosabelle came from her box to meet him.

'*Chéri*,' she cried, 'I feared some accident— twenty-four hours and not a sign of you.'

Nikko smiled and gave the porcelain curls a rough caress.

'I am well enough, Rosabelle, but I shall be leaving here to-morrow.'

'Oh la!' she cried, 'but there is a tragedy somewhere — I can see it in your eyes.'

Nikko shook his head.

'No tragedy, Rosabelle. I'm a bit tired, perhaps. I have been making the big affairs. I am going to become Commander-in-Chief of the French Army.'

'You have enlisted?' Horror was in the voice.

'Why not?'

'Oh, my son, my son, did I not warn you against chivalry, warn you?'

Nikko turned his head away sharply.

'Are there any letters for me?'

Rosabelle went back into her little box. She knew he was deliberately avoiding interrogation. Her 'milord' must have his way.

'A telegram only, that came yesterday morning. I had forgotten, too, there is a gentleman, who waits upstairs in your room.'

Nikko's brows came down.

'A gentleman. Who?'

'Docteur Smailey — a difficult name.'

'Smailey.' Nikko hesitated a moment and slowly climbed the stairs, twiddling the unopened telegram in his fingers.

Smailey was asleep on the bed, but he woke with a start when Nikko pushed open the door.

'At last,' he said, rubbing his eyes. 'I'd begun to despair of seeing you, Nicholas. You know, of course, what has brought me?'

'No.'

'But didn't you get the wire?'

'Just now, why?'

'Read it.'

Nikko broke open the seal. The telegram was from Fordyce and Brail, solicitors. It briefly stated that Lord Cheyne had died at Querne on the night of the 14th instant.

Nikko looked up and caught Smailey's watery eyes.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'Especially for you.'

'Thank you — we were old friends. Well, you succeed, Nicholas, succeed to the title.'

'I suppose I do.' He jerked back his head. 'It'll be useful to me where I'm going.'

'Goin'? Comin', you mean. Comin' back to Querne with *me*.'

'No. I've other plans.'

'They must be changed.'

'They can't be changed.'

Old Smailey puffed out his red cheeks.

'But damn it, boy, you must be there for the funeral. In self-defence. You know what the neighbours say — that you rode him down.'

'I'm afraid that doesn't draw me. Let them say what they like. I am returning to Querne neither now nor later.'

'But there's the estate — winding it up. Probate. God knows there's likely to be mess enough. For no other reason you'll be interested in what income you're likely to salve from the wreck.'

'Not a bit,' said Nikko. 'I can appoint someone with power of attorney — to attend to what has to be done.'

'But why on earth?'

'By this time to-morrow I shall be a Foreign Legionary.'

The doctor sat down upon the bed with a gasp.

'God save us!' he repeated, 'God save us!'

'I suppose, if we're any use to Him, He will,' said Nikko.

With an air of finality, Smailey collected his coat, a handbag, and an umbrella.

'They are all mad, the Cheynes,' he said. 'Mad, the lot of them. Here you inherit a title and one of the oldest seats in England, and it might be a molehill for all the interest you take.'

'That is just about the size it seems to me,' said Nikko, and, throwing up his head, laughed and laughed and laughed.

16

As he was preparing to leave the hotel next morning, Nikko was addressed in a soft American drawl by a sprucely dressed man of early middle age.

'Mr. Cheyne?'

'Yes.'

'My name is Fladgate — James K. Fladgate — and I am an attorney in the city of Philadelphia. I recognised you from the description given me by my daughter.'

Nikko looked mystified.

'My daughter is Veronica Fladgate, who is, or was, a schoolmate of the Princess Natalie, who ——'

'Shall we come in here?' said Nikko quickly, for people were passing in and out.

He led the way into the deserted dining-room and together they sat at a table.

'My daughter had what she considered the privilege of delivering a note from the Princess to you. As a father, Mr. Cheyne, I reproached her for breaking a rule, but as a man of sentiment I admired her vastly. Being in Paris I called on my daughter last evening and she told me a very affecting story.'

'One moment, sir,' said Nikko; 'that story is finished and I'd rather not revive it.'

The American nodded kindly.

'Of course!' said he. 'Don't imagine, Mr. Cheyne, I want to intrude. But a father is ruled by his offspring and my little girl wouldn't rest until I had given my word to seek you out and offer what assistance I could.'

'That's awfully kind, Mr. Fladgate.'

'I guess not ——'

'But I settled everything yesterday. It was quite simple.'

'And would you define yourself as a good settler in your present state of mind?'

'I did what I wanted — I enlisted in the Foreign Legion.'

The American's brows went soaring up.

'You've grit,' said he, 'but you are unwise.'

'I'm joining up to-day.'

'Then I guess that puts "paid" to everything. I'm sorry, for, if only to please my daughter, I'd like to have been of use.'

Nikko thought for a moment. An idea came to him and a quick decision.

'You could — but it's a lot to ask. I've just inherited a title and an estate and I shall want somebody to represent me. Now — you as an attorney ——'

Fladgate pulled his chair in to the table.

'Come on,' said he, 'let's hear.'

It was little that Nikko was able to tell. An old estate encumbered by debts and mortgages — 'Only the house, I believe, is free of mortgage' — perhaps some investments. He really didn't know.

'I'm not of age or I'd sell out. The place has no memories for me.'

'Entailed?'

'No.'

'Is there a trust?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

'So when you come of age you'll be free to do as you like.'

'I suppose I shall.'

'And you're burying yourself for five years in the Foreign Legion.'

'Five or ten.'

'Money, even a little money, in that time, put out judiciously might accumulate into a big sum.'

'I daresay — yes — I suppose ——' but Nikko's mind was elsewhere.

'Are you asking me to take control of your affairs, assuming there are no legal strictures that would make my administration impossible?'

'That's too much to ask. It was just for now, I thought, if you really meant ——'

'But after the now.'

'Things must rip.'

The American rubbed his nose reflectively.

'I am a lawyer,' he said, 'but in this case I'd have you know I'm not looking for a client.'

'I know that, sir ——'

'But I like you, Lord Cheyne, and just because you've had your wits shaken by a blow that doesn't seem a fair one, I wouldn't willingly stand by and see you let your whole future slip. We'll fix up a document giving me power to act as your deputy until you come of age. If after that you want me to take over and keep things going, don't be afraid to ask.'

'I'm tremendously grateful.'

'Maybe,' said Fladgate, and took both of Nikko's hands in his, 'but I'm going to say you're all kinds of damn fool to trust the first stranger who comes along.'

'I can trust myself to tell a friend,' said Nikko; and then with a twist of the features added, 'And anyway, I don't care.'

At a firm of English lawyers a power of attorney was drawn up and handed to James K. Fladgate of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

'And now,' said he, 'you and I are going to eat the finest lunch in Paris, accompanied by the best bottle of wine they can find in the caves. For this I have discovered in the course of a long and not unchequered

career, no new business and no partnership ended well that started badly. Afterwards I shall see you off, Cheyne, with my blessing.'

END OF BOOK I

BOOK II

The Legion of Lost Hopes

BOOK II

THE LEGION OF LOST HOPES

I

NIKKO CHEYNE — or rather Legionary John Horton, the name under which he had enlisted, soldier of the first class of the —th company of the Foreign Legion, had for seven years been regarded by his fellows as a mystery. But as, in that particular branch of the service, it was neither held proper, nor found healthy, to probe into the private affairs of one's fellows, a mystery he was allowed to remain.

Among themselves they said of him that he was fearless, generous, a droll companion upon occasion, but remote. He possessed an ability for withdrawing into mental solitudes of his own from which the noisiest racket in the world — the rattle of tins, the gabble of men's tongues, fights and cursings — failed to arouse him.

When as a new recruit — a *bleu* — this characteristic was first observed, steps were taken to jolt it out of him. But the persecution of old soldiers and the savagery of N.C.O.'s alike broke down before a wall of utter indifference. From time immemorial it has been held just and proper that a recruit should go through the mill and suffer bodily discomfort and mental anguish until such a time as his mind and muscle have been broken to the ways of his fellows.

But the shrewdest thrusts from expert hazers, men trained to a hair at the business of bullying, failed to excite from Nikko any manifestation of pain or resent-

ment. He was as callous to sarcasm as he was indifferent to danger.

'He has the features of a woman, but the hide of a rhinoceros,' they had complained.

When Nikko thought the persecution had gone on long enough, he had risen from his bed, yawned, and struck his chief tormentor on the mouth.

'You talk too much,' he said; 'not that it matters to me what you say — but it's a pity to talk too much.'

The fight that resulted was the chief subject of discussion in the barrack-room for many weeks. They had fought after the fashion of the Legion, with anything and everything, barring pistol or steel, that came to hand. It lasted for twenty-eight excitement-packed minutes and ended in the mutual unconsciousness of both contestants. Nikko was knocked endways by a loose boot, but not before he had planted a five-hundred-and-fifty-pound right swing on his opponent's jaw.

Since it is clearly waste of time to try and annoy anyone who is neither susceptible to annoyance nor afraid of taking care of himself, the hazing died rapidly. Besides, as they truly said, it is a foolish and risky business to fight with a man who is not angry. An angry man loses his head and lays himself open to a variety of attacks, but the man who is merely philosophical has a tremendous advantage in a scrap. Nikko Cheyne, for this cause, was left alone. He was not disliked, but was never popular. This was understandable, since popularity in any company depends upon giving away to others bits of oneself. That he never did, hence the mystery that enveloped him, but he gave away what, on the whole, was more greatly appreciated — money and hospitality. His two hundred a year — in that community of half-penny a day mercenaries — was regarded as riches beyond the dreams of avarice.

The —th company became famous as the wealthiest and most blessed in the Legion. Nikko's free-handedness was a byword. But he did not use money to buy himself favour or immunity from work, as once had been rashly suggested by a fellow Legionary, a Greek, who went by the nickname 'Opopo.' Nikko took Opopo by the heels and swept the barrack square with him, slinging what was left into the cookhouse rubbish bin.

'Listen,' he said, addressing the dusty head that reared itself slowly out of a mess of ashes and potato peelings. 'Listen, you Greek swine. I joined the Legion because I wanted work — continual non-stopping work — not because I wanted the favour of scum like you.'

It was the nearest approach to a revelation of himself Nikko had ever made, and was the cause of his becoming nicknamed 'Le Travailleur' — The Industrious. So Nikko cleaned his own boots, washed his own fatigue uniforms at Hell's Circle, and waxed and polished his leather straps and cartridge pouches as vigorously as the poorest *légionnaire* in the company.

If only on account of the tremendous degree of physical fitness the life inspired, he found it endurable.

Eighteen months after his enlistment the Great War broke out, and so began four years charged to the hilt with hardship and adventure. During those years Nikko fought on a variety of fronts. His company were in the epic defence of Verdun, and stood unshaken before the successive waves of assault flung against the lines by the army of the Crown Prince. At Verdun, Nikko picked up four wounds, a *médaille militaire*, and an offer of promotion, which he refused.

While in hospital at Châlons-sur-Saone he met James K. Fladgate again. The loss of Bettany was still so

present in his mind that he shrank from a meeting that would revive the affair into a more vivid light. But Fladgate had travelled from London to see him and it was impossible to refuse.

The grey-haired lean American was war-mad and had come to Europe to prosecute his share of it.

'Don't worry over any polite phrases of Wilson's,' said he. 'We'll come along with the rest of you.' Then, taking Nikko's hand, 'But you look fine — you've grown up. Probably hardship is your right diet. Now to business.'

After death duties had been paid and debts discharged, the Querne estate had realised a net total of £30,000.

'That sum you can do with as you please. You can put it in gilt-edge stock and let it accumulate — you can gamble it or chuck it in the sea.'

'I leave it to you.'

'Still of the same mind?'

Nikko nodded.

'Don't expect I'll ever touch it. War isn't over yet and ——'

Mr. Fladgate held up a hand.

'I'd rather not hear you talk that way. A boy of your years. Surely it can't still be as bad ——'

Nikko closed up like a clam.

'I didn't mean that. But after what I've seen of fighting, the chances of coming through aren't too good. Put the money into something useful — why not munitions?'

Mr. Fladgate's features broke into a crooked smile.

'I guess,' he said, 'you've got the makings of a financier. That your wish, then?'

'Whatever you like. I leave it to you, only ——'

'Well ——'

'I don't want to hear about it — much.'

'Right; then I'll carry on till you do. Any time you write there'll be an answer ready for the mail.'

'Thanks.'

There was an awkward silence.

'This war is hell,' said Mr. Fladgate.

'Do you know, I rather like it,' said Nikko. 'Must sound rot — but I do.'

Mr. Fladgate cocked an eye at him and nodded shrewdly. Nikko frowned. He knew the natural sentiment of his visitor would sooner or later reveal itself and though he half wanted to talk of the past an inhibition prevented him.

'Kind of rough life in the Legion?'

'Not too bad when you're used to it.'

'S'pose you'll cut out at the end of your five years' term.'

'If the war's over I might. If not — but I haven't thought much about it.'

'Veronica's married, d'you know.'

In spite of himself Nikko could not help flinching.

'Good luck to her.'

'Married an Englishman, too. Friend of yours, Joris Howard.'

'We were at Marlborough together. That's odd. A first-class chap.'

'I guessed you'd be surprised.'

'Yes, rather!' But Nikko's tone had become apathetic again.

Then another silence.

'Read the papers ever?'

Nikko shook his head. 'Not much time.'

'I see.' Mr. Fladgate nodded, paused, took courage and went for it. 'That little country, Sciriel, has kept out of the war up to now.'

'Yes — so I — heard,' said Nikko.

'But for how long they'll be able ——'

'Why not?' cried Nikko suddenly. 'Why should they be dragged in — what possible —— ?' He broke off short and rubbed his mouth with a dry hand. 'Say something nice to your — to Veronica from me — won't you?'

Mr. Fladgate nodded understandingly and touched the bandage on Nikko's shoulder.

'Wound healing all right?'

'First-rate.'

'That's the advantage of a healthy mind and a healthy system.'

'Don't know about the mind.'

'You don't have one without t'other.' Then, dropping his voice to a tender note, 'Isn't that other wound easier, too?'

Nikko made no reply.

Mr. Fladgate rose.

'Well, I'll carry on, Cheyne. There are just these papers I'll have you sign.'

The papers were signed and witnessed by two ward doctors.

'And you don't want me to write?'

'It's doubtful if I'd get the letters,' said Nikko. 'Good-bye and thanks awfully.'

In the train going north, Mr. Fladgate could not rid his mind of a curious mediæval impression.

'Not of this age,' he kept saying. 'Too constant for this age — kind of old-world chivalry. Well, well — takes all sorts ——'

The train steamed on.

2

THE war was not over when Nikko's first term of enlist-

ment expired. In consequence he signed on for a second five years and became a veteran.

He had given some offence by refusing to accept promotion, but as his seniors said it was his own affair.

'A brilliant soldier — courage — endurance — resource — but without a vestige of ambition.'

But Nikko was not the silent, remote figure of his first months of service. That he continued to stay in the Legion was no longer due to grief at the loss of Bettany and inability to see any future happiness for himself. The Legion had become a habit. Even the tenderest emotion and the greatest loss, with the passing of years recedes from the immediate foreground of a man's thoughts. There had never been, nor ever would be, another woman to dethrone Bettany from the place she occupied in his heart. That was unassailable, but she had become so much more a memory than a reality that even if the pain were less the great idea of her still remained. It was the original idea, hastily conceived and instantly accepted in the Rue Saint-Dominique, that kept Nikko Cheyne in Africa — a *légionnaire* at a few sous a day. The idea had been sublimated into a fixed and unswerving belief that the flame of his existence had flared up and been extinguished in a single episode. This being so, he was as well in one place as another. He had clung to that belief and in time it had become a habit of mind which took precedence over the cause which had inspired it. He never consciously regretted what he had done, but as months ran into years, long-bridled ambition sometimes spurred him to sudden resentments against dull routine and the narrow horizon that cramped his mental activity and independence. During the war these prickings had not troubled him. War in itself was a form of expression, but after the war, with little else

to occupy him but drills, *astiquage*, and the unending monotony of barrack life, the sharp rowels of that spur were continually at work.

Thus, though he was at times a livelier companion, Nikko Cheyne, in his second term of service, was not the perfect soldier he had been during the first. He chafed against discipline and more than once fell foul of the authorities.

'See here, old Travailleur,' said a corporal, who, unlike the usual run of Legion N.C.O.'s, did not care to see a good man get into trouble, 'your ways need mending. Why spoil a clean record? Hein?'

Nikko shrugged his shoulders. The N.C.O. went on:

'The road you are taking leads one way only, which is something you know or should know. Men who have started as well, aye and better, than you, Travailleur, have found their way through *le peleton des hommes punis* to the "*Joyeuse.*"'

But Nikko was not to be scared by talk of punishments or even the threat of the 'Joyeuse,' the dreaded penal battalion, whose shadow stands like a grim sentinel in the path of the unwary.

'Life is dull without a few risks,' he answered. 'There is little here to interest a man.'

The corporal swelled visibly.

'Then you should have taken promotion. Who knows, by now you might have been a corporal like me.'

Nikko laughed.

'Is it as fine as all that?' and laughed again.

'Stomach of a blue cat!' cried the corporal, 'would you laugh at the non-commissioned rank?'

His dignity was outraged.

'Either you have the *cafard* or you are a pariah without pride.' Again the little man swelled his cheeks.

Nikko was not so callous to abuse as formerly.

'When I swell up with pride,' he answered, 'it will be for better cause than cursing at a rabble of damned *légionnaires*.'

After that the lightnings blazed and the wretchedest fatigues were imposed on him.

So began months when Nikko was continually *en cellules* for increasing periods. Discipline must be maintained, and he had no one but himself to blame for what was happening, but this did not help him to avoid trouble. The cells with their humiliations and discomfort offered relief against the deadly monotony which every day oppressed him more and more.

A yearning for a break — for something different to happen — was ever present in his mind. He became curious about that other world, the world he used to know and to which for seven years he had become a stranger. He longed for new faces — new voices — another kind of conflict. He wished he had not forbidden Fladgate to write. A letter would have been an event to him who had received no letter of any kind for seven years.

And before him were another three years of service — with the same things happening — the same faces — the same noisy wine-guzzling nights and time-table days.

It was when his thoughts looked forward that the *cafard* — the madness of the Legion — transformed Nikko Cheyne into a different being — a crazy care-not-what breaker of rules and of men's heads.

But none cared. Sooner or later, the *cafard* took each man in its grip. It was a spectre that rose and waned and rose again. It was inevitable — recurring like the desert marches — the wretched streets of Sidi-bel-Abbes, the eternal *astiquage* — the cheap Algerian wine

— the hired women of the Kasbah — the regimental band — the bugle notes — the cursing of N.C.O.'s — rattling of tins — grunts of sleepers in the barrack-room at night, and all the mass of details and parades that went to the making of the Foreign Legion.

3

On an afternoon in the early spring of nineteen twenty-one, Nikko Cheyne with a group of his comrades was loafing near the guard-room, when a batch of recruits, under the charge of a sergeant and two corporals, shuffled through the barrack-gates.

To Nikko there was something pathetic about the arrival of these scared, ignorant creatures. Dirty, ill-kempt, and tousled, with the fear of strange places in their eyes, their faces grey with the grime of travel — their civilian clothes crumpled and tattered — herded like cattle for the slaughter, these men of alien races, refugees from justice, scourings from cities and down-and-outers, presented objects for sympathy rather than targets for abuse.

The sergeant halted and fell them into line, looked them over, and, laying his hands on the pit of his stomach, rocked to and fro like a man about to be sick.

'Oh, filth and children of unwedded parents!' he cried. 'Is the Legion to be defiled with the bodies of such sacred pigs?' Then to one of the corporals, 'Take away these lice.'

The old ritual. Accompanied by jeers from the trained soldiers, the awkward squad was marched off to be scrubbed, uniformed, and absorbed into the great machine. They were a miserable company, a poor lot, save for one neat little chap who stood smiling under the *barrage* of abuse, and who, despite the deplorable condition of his clothes, carried his head high and

walked with a swagger. For want of better occupation Nikko followed in the dust of the retreating squad, and presently found himself alongside the little man in the *lavabo*, where, before assuming the uniform of the Legion, a recruit must scrub himself from head to foot.

'What's your name,' he asked, 'or rather what name do you call yourself?'

The little man smiled through a froth of soap.

'Mekla. It is my own name, Monsieur.'

'Then you were a fool to come here,' said Nikko.

Mekla shrugged his shoulders.

'Maybe, Monsieur. But is it not said that the Legion is the refuge of losers?'

He spoke in French, but with an odd un-Gallic inflexion.

'Wash! Do not talk, pig,' shouted the N.C.O. in charge.

'He is washing,' said Nikko, in that new coldly insolent tone that was the foundation of so many of his troubles.

The N.C.O. scowled.

'I did not speak to you, Travailleur — get out of this. *Il faut de débrouiller.*'

It would have been open insubordination to disobey.

'I'll wait for you outside,' said Nikko. 'The first few days are the worst — there is no latitude for ignorance.'

'Did you hear my orders, Travailleur?'

'Monsieur le caporal has the finest voice in the Legion,' said Nikko, saluted, and went out.

Chance decreed that Mekla was allotted the next bed to Nikko's, a circumstance for which he had good reason to be grateful. Nikko instructed him in the all-important business of folding his uniform to the correct

elbow to finger-tip lengths, and arranging his *paquetage* on the shelf above the bed. Also he gave him information of a value beyond price. A *bleu* is entirely dependent upon what he can pick up from the old soldiers, for without that he would inevitably transgress the iron rules of the Legion and bring down upon his head the vials of wrath.

Mekla was swift to learn and ready with his gratitude.

'I had not looked to find such kindness,' said he. 'Monsieur is indeed most generous.'

In a barrack-room such speeches are rare. What he said was overheard by one Frojard, a thick-set, turgid-minded Walloon to whom all forms of nicety were abhorrent.

'Father of snakes!' he cried, 'what daintiness is this that talks with the pretty accents of a ——' The rest of the sentence is better left out. Then, seizing Mekla by the collar and the seat of his pants, he hoisted him into the air. 'A nosegay for someone! Who wants it?'

Without hesitation Nikko drove his fist home in Frojard's solar plexus. There was a whine of escaping breath and Frojard collapsed, dropping Mekla heavily to the floor.

The little man swiftly regained his feet and turned reproachfully to Nikko.

'Monsieur, I beg that you let me fight my own battles.' And, leaning forward, he struck Frojard in the mouth with an open hand.

The big Walloon was so surprised that he made no effort to get up, but sat gaping goggle-eyed from Mekla to Nikko and back again.

'Name of a sow, what does the fool mean by that?' he demanded.

'That I shall be charmed to cross swords with you at any place or time you may be pleased to name.'

From the room broke loose a great guffaw.

'Is that so funny?' demanded Mekla. 'In my country a challenge is accepted before it is laughed at.'

'Gee! Here's a spitfire,' said a lanky American, 'and *durn* me if he doesn't mean business.'

There had been something very convincing in Mekla's tone.

Nikko Cheyne put a hand on his shoulder.

'We don't fight with swords in the Legion,' said he. 'For one thing we have none and for another it isn't done.'

'No,' said Frojard, 'but it will give me an astounding joy to tear out your tripes.'

And he rose, drawing back his sleeves significantly.

Nikko Cheyne spoke.

'Frojard, there isn't going to be a fight — but if there is, there will be two.'

'Out of my way, Travailleur.'

'You know me, Frojard.'

Mekla pressed forward eagerly.

'I beseech you to allow me to spit this vermin after the custom of my people — doubtless I could make shift to do it with a bayonet.'

There was another gust of laughter and some shouts of approval. Pluck and spirit rank high in the opinion of the Legion.

The American ranged up beside Nikko.

'Travailleur has said it,' he announced. 'This fight is off.'

Then, turning to Mekla, with a grin that spread from ear to ear, he demanded:

'Say, what little dovecote d'you hail from where they go flashing steel about this way?'

Nikko translated.

'I am from Sciriel,' said Mekla.

Nikko Cheyne sat down on the bed with his eyes wide open.

4

Nikko and Mekla sat together at a café table in Sidi-bel-Abbes with a *pinaud*, a bottle of wine, between them.

'Now,' said Nikko, 'talk. Tell me about your country — why you are here — everything. In asking this I am defying every principle of the Legion, but, oh, Mekla, there are a million questions you may be able to answer. It's something beyond curiosity forces me to ask you.'

'But I am willing enough to talk, Monsieur, why not - but what interest —— ?'

Nikko waved the objection aside.

'Is it my personal history —— ?'

'No.'

'Then it is news of Sciriel you desire.'

Nikko nodded.

'Yes, to know that all is well with it.'

Mekla shook his head.

'All is not well or I should not be here.'

Nikko moved uneasily.

'You came into the war,' he said, 'toward the end.'

'We fought with the Allies. Lost many men — men we could ill afford to lose — for our population is small, Monsieur. As a result much of our cultivated land reverted to the wild. That started discontent and grumblings. It was this way, Monsieur: While the war lasted we had given protection and accommodation to the retreating armies of one of our greater neighbours. It is

not for the host to complain of the manners of his guests, but these guests were too numerous for our household — they sapped its resources, and when supplies ran low and there was a food shortage they seized in bulk much that was needed for the maintenance of our civil population. Nor was this all. They spread seditious talk abroad of a kind that prospers well among persons whose bellies are empty. When the armistice was signed and our own troops returned, it was to a country frowning with discontent and unrest. There was almost a famine. Many of our guests, as I call them by courtesy, did not return to their own places, but stayed in Sciriel and would not be moved. Presently other and more dangerous strangers drifted in from the Near East, men whose mouths were full of talk of a great democracy, of the glories of a commune, of the triumphs of Bolshevism. Monsieur, we Sciriens are a simple and a loyal race — but even the stoutest loyalty is shaken by hunger and insidious promises. Grumblings against the Royal House and its rule, faintly whispered at the first, grew louder day by day. At last it was no longer safe for the old King to ride in the streets of Djevo, the capital.'

Nikko's hand was pressed tightly over his mouth.

'In the autumn of last year the harvest failed — utterly. Monsieur, who does not know my country, will hardly realize the significance of that calamity. The nation lost its head — its ruler was powerless to control the situation. Our treasury, depleted by the cost of war, was unequal to the demands laid upon it. It is no simple matter for a country that for a generation has been entirely self-supporting to import from other nations the huge supplies that we suddenly needed. Besides, was there not a world shortage? Result, Monsieur, chaos. And out of that chaos came what from

time immemorial chaos has always produced — a man — one man — who rightly or wrongly captures the imagination of the people. Monsieur, no one knows whence came Foscani, the Sleek One, the Smiler. One day he was unknown — the next he was everything — and everywhere. Some say he is a Russian — others a Pole — it does not matter which. For my part I call him the creature of the moment. As if by magic he emerged — with a sudden force of five thousand hired mercenaries at his back — and as if by magic the whole country was in his grip.'

Mekla stopped to gulp down the contents of his glass.

'Monsieur, has it ever been your lot to see Liberty at its work? I pray not. It is not a pretty sight. That Liberty may prosper, order, decency, and even life itself must be smashed and trampled down. We Sciriens are not used to dead women lying in the streets of Djevo. Perhaps we went mad because of that.'

At the words 'dead women' Nikko sat bolt upright, with trembling hands that shook the glasses on the table.

'I, myself, was present in the Square when by Foscani's orders the King was hanged over the steps of the palace.'

Nikko could stand no more.

'Princess Natalie!' he cried, and again, 'The Princess Natalie!'

Mekla looked at him strangely and shook his head.

'Not even the Smiler would dare go to that length. Our Natalie is too well loved.'

The sweat was glistening on Nikko's face. He took his head in his hands.

'Thank God for that.'

'Her father, Prince Carelon, who now should be

King, was also spared — spared with some hundreds of noble gentlemen for work in the salt pits of Plevi.' Suddenly Mekla rose to his feet. 'Monsieur, I have been a Royalist devoted to the House of Montressor since infancy. Sciriel under any other rule is no longer my country. Wherefore — I have none — and ——' He brushed his uniform with a swift comprehensive gesture.

For a long time neither spoke — then Nikko slowly lifted his head and in his eyes burned a new and brilliant light.

'A republic,' he muttered; 'the Royal House has fallen?'

Mekla nodded.

'To the ground, Monsieur.'

Nikko Cheyne smote the table a great blow with his fist.

'I'm free!' he cried. 'Great God, I'm free!'

5

THAT evening, for the first time since he had joined the Legion, Nikko Cheyne's remoteness fell from him like a cloak. He was a man transformed — flung back to boyhood. He went a round of the cafés, standing drinks with a prodigality the like of which had never been known before. It was a mad night. A night of singing, of dancing, and of fights. Seeing that this was no ordinary occasion, the civilian population kept discreetly behind locked doors.

Loudest among the singers was Nikko. He was everywhere — in and out of the crowded cafés, spreading the fire of his enthusiasm in twenty different points.

He had started the crazy pilgrimage with Mekla for company, but it was not long before others were recruited and presently a great band of *légionnaires*,

roaring old marching songs, surged in his wake, sweeping all before them.

A night of nights! — and a wonder it was there was wine enough in the town to moisten those song-hoarse, burning throats.

'If this is a *cafard* of the Travailleur's,' they shouted, 'by the saints it is of a pleasant kind.'

The ingrained habit of obedience brought the revellers back to barracks at the summons of the bugle, but the guard at the gate tactfully avoided employing their usual vigilance as the men staggered through to their quarters. Even the most iron discipline is susceptible to elasticity. A collective spirit, no matter how harmonious its origin, is dangerous to meddle with. The word had been passed that a certain *légionnaire* had opened at a certain café a deposit account of liquor for the benefit of thirsty N.C.O.'s. Wherefore, the sentries on duty, in obedience to high command, kept their eyes discreetly lowered and were able to report, with truth, that they had 'seen' nothing wrong.

Afterwards, this universal celebration came to be known as 'the night when Sidi-bel-Abbes sang.'

No one thought to ask the reason that inspired the Travailleur's sudden madness of hospitality. A man's motives, being the only things that remain private to him in the Legion, are held sacred. It sufficed that the frugality of their lives had for one evening been gloriously enlivened and no one complained if in consequence next morning his tongue was starchy and his head throbbed.

Before the gaiety was at its height, Nikko had scribbled some words on a telegraph form and given it with money to an old Arab who, from time to time, rendered small services to *légionnaires* and was to be trusted.

The message, addressed to James K. Fladgate, was brief and to the point: 'I must see you at once.' It was signed 'Nikko' and addressed to the Carlton Hotel, London. 'Please transmit.'

The Arab promised to wire it first thing next morning, and Nikko, knowing the promise would be kept, abandoned himself to the madness of the night.

The fact that by the terms of his enlistment there were three more years before he could obtain his discharge did not deject Nikko. The reason which had made him join the Legion no longer existed — therefore he would cut loose.

The Legion has a very effective system for preventing desertion. Not one man in a hundred succeeds in getting clear away. Those who fail in the attempt either fall victim to the Goums — desert Arabs employed by the French to round and capture deserters dead or alive — or they go to a living death with the penal battalion at Biribi.

Nikko knew well enough what failure to escape would mean, but in his sudden new-found joy there was no place for thoughts of failure.

Thus, although they knew it not, a hundred or more of his comrades in the Legion and a great number of N.C.O.'s were drinking success to the escape of Nikko Cheyne.

6

Nikko's conduct, while waiting for the reply to his telegram, was exemplary. That he contrived to make it so was the worst ordeal through which he had ever passed. Obsessed by thoughts of escape, it was intolerable to submit to the routine of daily duties. Knowing that of late he had become a marked man upon whom his superiors were ever ready to drop, he

guarded his tongue and obeyed orders with an alacrity to which since the war he had been a stranger.

He did not dare to think too much of Bettany and kept his mind solely focussed upon the vital business of avoiding trouble. Terror, a sensation hitherto unknown to him, walked at his elbow, that on the day when Fladgate should arrive, he would be confined to cells for the commission of some trivial offence.

Only once more he talked to Mekla about Sciriel, and that was to ask if he knew aught of the Baron Vilasto.

Mekla nodded.

'A very old man now, whose brain was turned to softness by the tragedy of the revolution.'

'Mad?' Nikko queried.

Mekla shook his head.

'Not mad — say rather a child again. He lives in the house where the Princess is a prisoner and is the sole member of her household allowed to move freely about the city.'

'He was a great gentleman,' said Nikko, with a tightness in his throat.

'Monsieur speaks truly. And now that great gentleman is a child who blinks and smiles foolishly at the sun.'

'Mekla, how is the Princess called these days?'

'By the name Montressor, Monsieur.'

'Montressor,' Nikko repeated softly.

A bugle sounded.

Nikko was first to reach the barrack square and fall in beside the marker.

Just a week after he had sent his telegram, the room corporal tossed a letter to him. Nikko had schooled himself to conceal his feelings, but as the square of folded paper fluttered toward him, his control snapped

like a reed. Without a word of thanks he snatched it up, and clattering down the stairs raced to the Cercle d'Enfer — the washing-place — which at that hour of the day was deserted.

As he ran, a freak of imagination sent his mind somersaulting back over a span of seven years and he was a boy again, racing with Bettany's first letter in search of solitude.

The letter was brief.

I am waiting at the Hôtel de Maroc. J. H.

The initials puzzled him. Illumination came. J. H. stood for Joris Howard, Fladgate's son-in-law. Veronica's husband. His old school friend.

Tingling with excitement, Nikko tore the note in small pieces and buried them. Then he returned to his quarters and changed hastily.

At the barrack gate the sergeant of the guard called on him to halt.

'Name of a dog — do you not read the orders?'

Nikko had buttoned his coat from left to right instead of right to left in accordance with the order of the day.

'Get back to your quarters.'

It was vain to plead. Seething with rage, Nikko returned, rebuttoned his coat, and waited an hour before making a second attempt to pass out.

'If I'm stopped again,' he muttered, 'I'll go mad — I know I'll go mad.'

But he was not stopped. The sergeant's attention had been diverted for the moment and Nikko slipped past the sentry unnoticed.

The Hôtel de Maroc was situated on the outskirts of the town. Before its doors was a large yellow Cadillac, in which was seated a girl. It was Veronica.

Although he had seen her only once, and that seven years ago, Nikko instantly recognised her.

Shortening his step, he passed the car on the off side and, without looking up, said swiftly:

'Tell him to walk to that clump of trees by the broken wall.'

Veronica started. Nikko passed on.

In the shade of the clump of trees hidden by a tumble-down wall, he crouched and waited.

Footsteps approached — and a man's shadow spread across the sand at his feet. A voice said:

'Cheyne.'

''Tisn't safe to talk here,' said Nikko rapidly. 'We mustn't be seen together.'

'Skirt round the back of the hotel and hop in through the first window in the west wall.'

'Right.'

The footsteps retreated and died away. Nikko peered down the road. It was empty. Veronica was no longer in the car.

Nikko rose, returned by the way he had come, and dived up a narrow passage between the hotel and the next house.

There was no one in the garden and, with a sigh of satisfaction, he vaulted the rail of a low verandah and swung his legs over the sill of an open window. Without looking to see who was in the room, he seized the shutters, drew them across the window, and snapped down the bar.

After the brilliant sunlight the room seemed unnaturally dark. Like ghosts, two figures approached him and seized his hands, while a voice in a soft, purring accent, crooned:

'If this isn't the best possible meeting — I'd like to know what is.'

7

It may have been the touch of a woman's hand — the sound of a woman's voice — the sudden unaccustomed experience of being once more with people of his own kind that robbed Nikko of the power of speech and put upon him a shyness and restraint he had never before known.

Veronica made him sit on the bed, and with swift intuition talked of this and that until an ease of their society began to steal through him.

'Father was in America,' she announced, 'and guessed after breaking so long a silence you wanted something to happen quick. He couldn't have made this place under three weeks, so he figured we'd better come right over.'

'We were at Cannes,' Joris cut in, 'cruising round on Arbuthnot's yacht. The old man sent us a fifteen-page cable saying I'd better shoot over and see you straight away.'

' Of course he meant me to come, too,' Veronica cut in. 'So we sailed this way without losing a moment.'

Nikko stiffened.

'You came in the yacht?'

'Why, of course, and hired this little car for the desert trip.'

Nikko's hands were opening and shutting with excitement.

'Where is the yacht lying?'

'Oran,' said Joris.

'Oran — bad spot for me,' said Nikko, 'but it can't be helped.'

'You're not thinking of making a bolt for it?'

'I've gone beyond thinking.'

Veronica clapped her hands.

'Didn't I say — didn't I? When we read that bit in the papers about the revolution in Sciriel — didn't I say?'

And suddenly Nikko realised that Sciriel was no longer a forbidden subject: that he was free at last to speak the truth.

'You were right, Veronica.'

'Of course I was — and I wouldn't have thought much of you if I hadn't been.'

'Wait a bit,' said Joris. ''Tisn't as easy as it looks. Suppose you didn't pull it off, old friend, got yourself nabbed — and all that?'

Nikko laughed.

'I've a feeling no power on earth is going to stop me — now.'

'And what's more,' said Veronica, 'no power on earth is going to stop us getting you aboard Teddy Arbuthnot's yacht.'

Nikko looked into a pair of eyes that brimmed with fierce excitement.

'I half wish ——' he began, but Joris dropped a hand on his shoulder.

'No use, Cheyne, she would come. She isn't the kind of wife that gets left out.'

Veronica smiled.

'It's been slow work,' she said, 'but I've got that great truth into his head at last. Give us the movement orders. What's the route — and when do we start?'

'Now,' said Nikko, 'for if I were to return to the Legion after this — I'd — I'd ——'

'Fetch out that suitcase and a set of razors,' said Veronica. 'I'll go and see there's plenty of gas in the tank, while he takes off that moustache and gets into Christian clothes.'

8

THE big yellow Cadillac picked up a walking civilian outside the city of Sidi-bel-Abbes. After that it travelled at speed in the direction of Oran.

'It's unlikely that they'll notice my absence before morning,' said Nikko, 'but we won't linger and we won't stop on the road.'

He pointed to a couple of white-burnoused Arabs mounted on ponies, who were riding against the skyline of a sandy ridge, and added:

'Goums! My dead body 'ud be worth twenty-five francs to those chaps.'

Joris's foot went down on the accelerator.

Veronica's face was bright with excitement.

'Millionaires are cheap out here,' she said. 'I wouldn't have missed this little adventure for something.'

'Millionaires,' Nikko echoed.

'As near as doesn't matter.' Then with an upward fling of the voice: 'Good land! we never told him — he doesn't know! Father turned over your fortune to some effect. You can write your name against six figures when you've the fancy.'

'That's true,' Joris endorsed, over his shoulder. 'The old man has done you proud, Cheyne. Lord knows how, but he did it. Round about seven hundred and fifty thousand, I believe.'

For a mile Nikko said nothing — while the realisation of nearing freedom — of the wealth he would command and of the possibilities of the future stirred and fermented in his brain.

'Faster,' he said; 'won't it go faster?'

'We're running at fifty-eight — but I'll try and squeeze out another mile or two.'

'Do,' said Veronica, 'for Nicholas Cheyne hasn't

lived for seven years and feels it's about time he made a start.'

There was no moon and the night was very dark. To be on the safe side, Nikko curled himself up on the floor boards at Veronica's feet and was covered by a rug as they entered the silent streets of Oran. At the head of the main thoroughfare they were stopped by a patrol.

'From which direction have you come?' boomed out of the darkness.

Joris Howard replied in fluent French, to hide an ominous click from the back of the car.

'Did you see aught of a deserter from the Foreign Legion near the town of Sidi-bel-Abbes?'

'No, unless that would be a fellow in baggy breeches hauled at a rope-end by a couple of mounted Arabs.'

A grim laugh followed this ready improvisation.

'That will be him, sure enough, Monsieur. The Goums have him. Well, good-night.'

'Nothing else I can tell you?' Joris enquired.

'Nothing. Good-night, again.'

Joris drove on. Over his shoulder he demanded:

'Veronica, you little mutt. What were you doing with that pistol?'

'I guess if necessity arose I was prepared to use it,' she answered sweetly.

Nikko Cheyne under his covering of rugs kissed the point of a dusty shoe and counted himself privileged to do so.

When next the car stopped, it was beside the quay.

'There's the yacht, Cheyne, at anchor.'

Nikko peered through the darkness at the riding-lights and nodded.

'Think you could swim out to her? There are sure

to be gendarmes or officials on the jetty where the dinghy is moored.'

'Of course I could.'

'Then suppose you hide somewhere among all this gear and stuff. We'll return the car to the garage and then get back to the yacht. No good arriving there before us. The watch would be certain to spot you and kick up a shine. Soon as we get aboard, I'll flash a lantern. There's a rope-ladder on the port side. Understood?'

To Nikko, waiting at the edge of freedom for the signal to start, that half-hour was an eternity. He curled down among a litter of rigging and fisherman's gear and strained unblinking eyes through the heavy darkness. The oily water below clucked derisively. Wavelets tap — tap — tapped against the stones of the pier like a mighty heart beating. From the native quarter of the town came the persistent throbbing of a drum and the wail of a pipe that seemed to be blown by lips of despair. Then came another and more terrifying sound, the rasping footfalls of a patrol coming nearer and nearer like the approach of Fate itself. Voices spoke close to where he lay hidden. A match flared — a cigarette was lit — and the patrol passed on and out of hearing.

It seemed more like a day than half an hour before a new sound, the splash of oars, came to his ears. A woman's voice, sweet and lilting, rippled across the water. The words she sang were made beautiful by darkness, by distance, and by their significance.

> 'One more river — one more river to Jordan:
> One more river — there's one more river to cross.'

Filtering through the spars and rigging of sleeping ships, the old marching song sounded exquisite and

rare. It died away like a breeze that stirs grass and presently a light flashed. One — two — three.

Nikko Cheyne entered the water as silently as a rat, and ten minutes later stood dripping upon the white deck of a floating piece of England.

END OF BOOK II

BOOK III

Foscani — The Liberator

BOOK III

FOSCANI — THE LIBERATOR

I

At a town in Czecho-Slovakia, Nikko Cheyne bade farewell to his two staunch friends.

'If conditions are at all possible,' said he, 'I'll let you know — but from what one hears they aren't. Besides, I've an idea I want to prospect on my own.'

'We shall be standing by at Fiume,' said Joris.

Veronica was angry.

'If you won't take me — at least you might take Joris.'

But Nikko shook his head.

'If Fortune turns my way,' he said, 'I'll have brought her out of Sciriel inside a month. If there were more of us we should excite suspicion and comment. You've been marvellous to me — so don't deny me this last favour.'

Veronica took his hands in hers and petted them.

'Have it your own way. But whatever you do, don't take long. If rumour's to be trusted, Sciriel is no sort of place for an ex-Princess.'

Nikko kissed Veronica's hands and saw them off by the afternoon train. After which he called upon the British Consul.

'My dear sir,' said that official, 'you must please yourself, but it's ten to one against getting into Sciriel, and, if you do succeed, it's a thousand to one against getting out of it.'

'I shall get in — never fear.'

'There are no trains, as I suppose you know.'

Nikko nodded.

'And no passports are being issued. The country has cut itself off from civilisation completely.'

'I have the finest passport,' said Nikko, and slapped his breast-pocket suggestively.

The Consul laughed.

'Freedom has no use for money. The currency of Sciriel was withdrawn from circulation ten months ago. Everything is rationed nowadays. It is a punishable offence to be found in the possession of notes or silver.'

'Well, we shall see,' said Nikko.

Two days later, astride of a raw-boned nag with a pack-mule ambling at the end of a leading rein, Nikko Cheyne rode up the Solji Gorge that led to the frontiers of Sciriel. On one side, cut into the naked rocks beside the road, were the endless twists and turns of the disused permanent way, its once bright rails now red with rust and distorted from lack of attention.

On the other side, at the base of a deep ravine, the Solji roared and surged over grinding boulders. Since the revolution, scarce anyone, save a few refugees, had used the old road. Its surface was scarred by torrential winter rains and in places was almost blocked by landslides and tumbled rocks. Here and there pieces had given way and fallen into the ravine. It was a dizzy road, rising up and up into the snows of an impassable chain of mountains that spanned the northwest frontier of Sciriel.

Vilasto had told the truth in saying Nature had protected his country against the invader, for a single machine-gun could have held the pass against an army corps.

The air grew very cold and eager as Nikko reached the higher levels. He drew his coat more closely about

him and tugged the fur cap down over his ears. The huge precipitous slopes on either side were cloaked with pines, black as night against the snow.

Four hours' slow ascent brought Nikko to the summit, and here he reined in to rest the beasts and look down in admiration through a funnel of jagged peaks upon a vast alluvial basin expanding to the east and falling away into glens and lowlands through which he traced the courses of rivers. The mighty landscape was starred here and there with villages, whose white houses were huddled together like birds in a nest. Miles away to the southeast, piercing a haze of smoke, rose the spires and roofs of a city.

There could be no doubt this was Djevo, the capital, for all the roads, which ran like straight white lines across that land of meadow and vineyard, converged at this single point.

Nikko's heart hammered with a sudden fury of expectation. Somewhere beneath those pale mists was Bettany, for whose sake for seven years he had been an exile.

Bettany — yes, and really Bettany now — no longer the Princess Natalie Melliora Maria Elizabeta — but Bettany the woman.

Nikko Cheyne drew a great breath of mountain air, and tightened his reins for the descent into Sciriel.

From a close study of maps, Nikko knew that from the summit of the pass to the frontiers of Sciriel was a matter of three or four miles. But miles are deceptive on those circling mountain roads, and a very little distance had been covered before, at a sharp bend, he found himself looking down on the roof of a rough stone barrack against whose walls lounged some soldiery. Tiny specks they looked viewed from above — too remote even to be able to discern what manner of

uniform they wore; but Nikko could see the light flashing on a bayonet and through the clear air the sound of their voices and the clink of cooking-pots rose up to him. The little station was situated on a wide shelf on the mountain-side. After the station the road looped into a hairpin bend and spiralled downward in a series of zigzags built out of, or cut into, the precipitous rock.

Nikko had ridden fully a quarter of an hour before the station came in view again — this time farther off, but more nearly on the same level. Between him and it was a wide ravine spanned by a narrow bridge, whose protecting parapets had fallen away. As Nikko rode over the bridge a double bright light flashed for an instant in his eyes.

Field-glasses. His coming had been observed. Then a scrap of rock blotted out the post and under its lee he continued his journey for two hundred yards or more.

At the next bend Nikko was considering the advisability of hallooing, when his horse shied at the picked bones of a skeleton lying beside the way. Through the frontal bone of the skull was a neat round hole. Nikko steadied his horse and looked down in mild wonder at the poor remnants of what once had been a man, and as he looked a surprising thing occurred. With a thud something hit the rock a few feet above his head and whined away across the ravine. There was a faint pop. He was being fired at from the post.

Nikko Cheyne had been under fire too often in the last five years to take unnecessary risks; on the other hand, he had no intention of turning back. Spurring his horse, he rode swiftly onward and did not pause until once more the natural formation of the country offered him shelter.

Although out of sight, he was now level with the

post at a spot where, a hundred and fifty sheer feet beneath him, was another section of the road, which Nikko realised must be beyond the post itself.

From the sample the frontier guard had given him of their hospitable intentions, it seemed certain that even if allowed to enter Sciriel, they would confiscate any arms or money of which he might be in possession.

It was not, however, part of Nikko's plan to enter a foreign country penniless and without means of self-protection.

The road below offered a solution.

As swiftly as possible he transferred an automatic pistol, some ammunition, and a great pile of notes to a small satchel, leaving himself only enough money to ensure popularity.

Dropping the satchel over the low parapet, he had the satisfaction of seeing it fall into a thicket of prickly pear on the road below.

They did not fire again as Nikko rounded the last bend; it is possible they were too surprised that he had not taken the hint and turned back; but four soldiers were presenting their rifles and a gaunt officer in charge was brandishing an enormous revolver when Nikko reined up before the white wooden bar that spanned the road.

'Who are you and what do you want?' demanded the officer.

Nikko dismounted and stretched his limbs.

'A drink, citizen officer,' he said. 'A drink, for if that road were not long enough to parch a man's throat the welcome you gave me is enough to do it.'

One of the soldiers gave a great guffaw, for your Scirien is a jovial fellow, who likes a jest and thinks well of him who can crack one.

'Count yourself lucky you did not drink lead back there at the bend.'

Nikko shrugged his shoulders.

'There is no luck in these matters,' said he. 'A man shoots straight or otherwise, according to his skill. But then a Scirien was ever more famous for his handling of a sword than a rifle.'

'That is true,' said the officer, 'but what do you know of Sciriens and their ways — who are a foreigner?'

'Less than I hope to know, after I have tasted the freedom Sciriel has so lately won.'

'A fair answer,' grunted one of the men.

'He has courage, too,' said another.

Nikko shed a friendly smile upon the speakers.

'You would like to see my passport before allowing me to go through.'

The officer shook his head.

'We have no truck with foreign passports,' said he. 'What is your business in Sciriel?'

'It is a place I have not seen,' Nikko answered lightly. 'And I am a wanderer filled with curiosity.'

'Hm!' said the officer, 'but we have new laws here for strangers, that might turn curiosity to resentment.'

'I conform to the rules of the company in which I find myself.'

'All in Sciriel must work for the State as the State demands.'

'It is a fair condition.'

'Nor can anyone who enters Sciriel leave without State authority.'

'What of that?' said Nikko. 'It is a fair country. A man could be as happy here as elsewhere.'

'Maybe. It is further set down that a foreigner entering must be without money and without arms.'

Nikko did not think it advisable to show too much enthusiasm for this condition. He rubbed his chin.

'Is this necessary?'

'It is the law.'

Nikko shrugged his shoulders.

'Then I must abide by it. I have no arms, and doubtless I may be afforded the opportunity of destroying what little money is in my wallet.'

'Come in here,' said the officer, and led the way into the guard-house.

The officer did not allow Nikko to cast his bundle of notes upon the wood fire. That, he declared, was not the proper procedure. All monies collected at the frontiers were despatched to the treasury for disposal in bulk. He reproved Nikko for wondering that the treasury was still in existence, saying it was not for visitors to express views or opinions upon this or any other matter. The State was in charge and Nikko could rest assured that he, an officer of the State, would see that its orders were faithfully observed.

Nikko was photographed for the Record Department and given identity papers, a book of dated food coupons, and instructions where to report when he arrived at the capital.

'You are now,' said the officer, 'temporarily a citizen of Sciriel, and as such you will do well to guard your tongue and obey any orders that may be given to you. The penalty for disobedience is sharp and summary. I would further advise you to say nothing of the money I have confiscated. If it were known that you had brought so much, you might be suspected of capitalistic tendencies and would therefore be branded an enemy of the revolution.'

'I understand perfectly,' said Nikko.

'It is important,' said the officer.

Nikko could not resist a touch of irony.

'As you have been so generous with your advice to me — may I now advise you?'

'Proceed.'

'It is a pity that the treasury should waste good money. Why not spend some of it over the frontier yonder?'

For a moment they regarded one another in silence and slowly the officer's rigid officialdom relaxed.

'Between ourselves, Monsieur, I intend to do so. But ——'

'Your confidence is safe enough with me,' said Nikko with a laugh.

Before proceeding on his journey, Nikko was invited to the midday meal. In conformity with the new order, officers and men messed at a single table, where all distinctions of rank were laid aside. Only in the exercise of his duty was an officer allowed to take precedence over his men. At the table they were one. The fare was frugal, consisting of grey sour-dough bread and a mess of vegetables with here and there a small gobbet of meat, the whole being washed down with watered wine. But even a little victuals comforts a man's belly and loosens his tongue, and during the meal Nikko learnt much that was valuable to him about the conditions of the country.

He was told he need never bother about food, as under the new rule he had but to present a coupon at any house or cottage to be granted a place at their tables. It was a punishable offence to refuse hospitality to a coupon-holder.

'Is the food eaten by a traveller afterwards made up to his host by the State?' Nikko enquired.

'In theory, yes,' replied the officer, after a dubious pause, 'although in practice it does not always work

out so. You see, comrade, the coupons are dated and it is an offence to present them after the date for which they are issued. Only between the hours of eleven and twelve each day are the food depots open and it is not always possible to reach them in time. It usually happens, therefore, that the visitor's coupon is torn up and the householder bears the brunt of the entertainment.'

Nikko could not resist a smile. The officer scowled reprovingly.

'It is not possible,' he said, 'to cover every eventuality, and the citizen would do well not to laugh at things he does not understand.'

Nikko took leave of his hosts, mounted and rode away, pausing for a moment to collect the satchel from the spines of the prickly pear and redispose its contents in various pockets.

The Browning automatic felt good lying snug across his thigh and the well-stuffed wallet was a comforting companion buttoned against his breast.

A mile down the road, Nikko came once more upon the railway, where once the track had plunged into the heart of the mountains, but the entrance to the Solji tunnel was blocked with masonry and huge piles of fallen rock. Telegraph wires had been cut and trailed upon the ground. Sciriel had slammed and bolted the door and shut her ears to the world outside.

2

Nikko's first night in Sciriel was spent in the fens at the cottage of a leech-gatherer — a decent, grumbling soul — who had little to say, nor any imagination of the affairs of his country. The leeches which were his harvest appeared to have absorbed what few thoughts the old fellow had to spare. He told Nikko that the market for leeches had ceased to exist since the revolu-

tion, but that, inasmuch as life had no other interest for him, he went on collecting them and would have a fine lot to sell when times changed. He showed Nikko tubs and barrels in which he stored his captives — and also an evil pond at the back of the cottage by a cross-road that led to Plevi Prison, in which he declared were thousands of the creatures.

Nikko was not sorry to say good-bye, as neither the man himself nor his curious trade was over-attractive.

Before long he came to a small town, where he was stopped and called upon to produce his papers. After a few minutes of question and answer, he was allowed to proceed.

Whatever might be said in praise of the newly found freedom, there could be no doubt that the faces of the Sciriens did not reflect it. There were few people in the streets, but those few alike wore an expression compounded of doubt, sullenness, and apprehension. The babies on the doorsteps were thin, wan, and wretched. Not one soul seemed at ease.

A similar state prevailed even among the dogs — poor beasts with bones astare — nosing in gutters for scraps, fawning up to strangers and snarling away. A dog is a sure mirror of his master, and Nikko did not need to look upon many of these miserable curs to form a swift estimate of the success of the revolution in so far as it affected the people of these outlying places.

At street corners lounged members of the civil guard, their bright scarlet breeches and tunics of horizon blue making brave splashes of colour against the ochre walls. Their heads were crowned with *calpacs* of grey fur with scarlet cockades over the right ear.

These men were of a Tartar type and bore no physical resemblance to the townsfolk, being larger and of a

raw-boned build. Their wide-set eyes were narrow and had a tendency to run upwards at the outer corners; their brows were low and beetling. They carried revolvers in open holsters, worn in front over the left side, while from their right wrists dangled batons heavily loaded with lead. They gave the appearance of having been much better fed than the civilian population, a circumstance which doubtless afforded them a great advantage when called upon to take part in any dispute or disorder.

In the course of the day, Nikko passed through several such small towns and villages, and everywhere was the same evidence of privation and oppression. The walls of the houses were plastered with orders, edicts, and circulars promulgating punishments that had been inflicted upon enemies of the Republic. Across the foot of every sheet was a facsimile of Foscani's signature. One notice which recurred everywhere particularly attracted Nikko's attention. It was to the effect that any person, male or female, found at or near the marsh of Plesna, would be shot summarily or sent to the Pits without trial.

Unable to restrain his curiosity, Nikko asked of a townsman the reason why that district should be proscribed.

'Are you a fool to ask such a question?' was the surly rejoinder.

'No — a stranger,' Nikko replied.

'Then it is because Plesna is the centre of the counter-revolutionaries — the *sacrés* Royalists, who, under the Duke of Svorzo, given the chance, would plunge our country once more into ruin.'

This was news to Nikko. His brows went up in sharp surprise.

'Why is the hornets' nest not smoked out?' he asked.

'That will be done when the swamps drain and harden in July.'

'I see,' said Nikko. 'They are protected by the marsh?'

The man nodded. 'By the marsh in front and mountains at the rear.'

'Is this an armed force?'

'Aye, armed with the sword — but nothing else.' He laughed grimly. 'Those swords will flash prettily as they slip from the fingers before the fire of Foscani's Rifles. There will be a fine killing of the old nobility before the harvest moon is at full.'

Nikko Cheyne mastered a sudden impulse to strike the grinning mouth with the back of his hand. Of all men in the world he had the best reason to be grateful to the revolution, yet what little he had seen of its working only served to inspire contempt and anger. No good purpose, however, was to be achieved by any statement to that effect — indeed that way led to disaster; so Nikko shook his reins and rode on.

The last part of his journey was over rising ground.

Djevo, the capital, was built upon a plateau and was flanked by a minor range of mountains, shown on the map as Les Alpes du Midi.

Through the centre of the town was a deep gorge along whose base a stream ran over rocks. The stream was of glacial origin, flowing from the heights through a series of fertile oases or *poljis*. At one time there was a thunderous torrent ripping through the gorge, but in the reign of the late King a dam had been constructed across the lower bulwark of the Polji of Sarsanova, transforming it into a huge reservoir whose waters, carried along concrete gullies and through great iron pipes, supplied the main electric power plant of the country. Beyond the power-house, the waters had been

switched into one of the terrifying swallow-holes for which the Balkans are famous, and thence travelled through echoing galleries hidden in the bowels of the earth, to reëmerge twenty miles distant and swell the volume of the river Plesna. Thus, the stream which trickled through the gorge of Djevo was but a faint echo of the torrent which in days gone by had given the city the name of 'The Town of the Roaring Waters.'

It was dusk when Nikko approached the city walls. Djevo had been built in troublous times, and was surrounded by a great battlemented rampart, thirty feet in height and half that number in width.

Near the main gate, which was tall, narrow, and flanked on either hand with circular towers, a knot of townsfolk were standing. What first attracted Nikko's attention to them was their intense stillness. They stood with heads bent and eyes fixed in one direction. As he came nearer, Nikko saw that they were looking at a pile of bodies that lay crumpled against the wall. The stonework of the wall itself was chipped in many places and splashed with lead and blood at the height of a man's heart. A little distance away, two men were busy with spades. The ground upon which they were working was rippled with uneven mounds, at some of which big black crows were driving with their beaks.

A gust of wind disturbed a litter of rags that once had been garments, and a man's hat pierced with a hole was blown across the roadway. The wind carried a flavour of rotting and decay.

Nikko Cheyne rode through the gate unchallenged and was in the city of Djevo.

3

His first impression of Djevo was of neglect and desolation.

In the main boulevard was a total absence of traffic, for by order of the revolution private ownership of cars or other vehicles was prohibited. All transport had been subsidised by the State to be used as the State required. The tramway services had been suspended, and the overhead wires sagged and stranded from their iron standards. The condition of the roads was beyond description. In many places the *pavé* had been torn up by the mob and never replaced. There were pot-holes everywhere and cavities deep enough to drown a dog. Paving-stones had been wrenched from their beds to act as barricades in the street fighting that had taken place. In their old resting-places coarse grass was sprouting.

Several houses, apparently as a result of shell-fire, were mere skeletons, while others with stripped fronts shamelessly exhibited their interiors to the gaze of passers-by. Shutters banged and clapped against broken walls, and there was scarce a house in the whole thoroughfare in whose windows any glass remained. Box lids and bits of rag, cardboard, or sail-cloth had been nailed across the broken frames as a rude protection against wind and weather.

The names over shops were the only evidence of the flourishing trade for which Djevo had once been famed. The shops themselves, empty of wares, had been boarded up or were used as communal dining-rooms or stores from which rations were issued.

And as in the smaller towns everywhere were posters, edicts, warnings.

Nikko rode on until he came to a great square, at the far end of which stood what once had been the Royal Palace.

As Nikko paused in admiration before the fragile outlines of this exquisite piece of eastern-western

architecture, a sensation of nearness gripped his imagination.

In that white palace, Bettany had been born — her first conscious gaze maybe drifting over the square to the spot where now he stood. Her feet had run through those rooms and galleries and her face had shone at the windows. Which was her window, he wondered, which was her room? Upon which sill had she rested her elbows and, with chin cradled in cupped hands, dreamed of those days when in the first tide of their love all else had been forgotten?

He could not have conceived a lovelier setting for his Princess — one more fitted to his memory of her.

But the palace was hers no longer. The Royal Standard of Sciriel had been torn down and trampled in the dust, and against the sky now rode the crimson and black flag of Liberty.

As Nikko stood looking and thinking, he was torn by conflicting emotions and sudden resentments. The revolution had given him the right to bridge the gulf that her birth had cleft between them, but had it also given him power to make up to her in happiness for all she had been forced to sacrifice and forgo? It was a question none but she could answer. Their old-time tragedy had been that she was a Princess. May that not have been eclipsed by the greater tragedy of a nation's disloyalty? She, a Princess, had been levelled to the people. Would the loyalty and devotion of one man cause her to forget?

None moved in the Square, for with the coming of freedom many pleasant customs had passed away. In the old days it was a fashion at eventide for Sciriens to sit on the benches beneath the trees — to congregate in groups by the railings and listen to the palace band, or watch the lights in the windows, or speculate

upon the shadows that crossed behind the lowered blinds. There is about a royal palace a pleasant mystery that stirs men's imaginations and draws them to linger in idle hours. The uniforms of the palace guards were bright and filled the eye, and in the great courtyard were ever colourful doings — bits of pageantry and the passings of noble gentlemen and their ladies — whose names were household words.

Sometimes in the old days the old King was to be seen mounted and in hunting green; or on opera nights stepping into the State coach drawn by white stallions and accompanied by outriders carrying torches. And sometimes the Princess Natalie would pass out of the gates, mingling with the crowds as freely as though she were one of the simple folks who composed them. The Princess Natalie was free of the city of Djevo. She did not need an escort when she walked abroad. There were always loyal fellows ready to set business or duty aside and follow in her wake to protect her from any shadow of harm. And these counted themselves overpaid for their care if they won a smile from her. The great square had been a fine place in the days before the old King had danced in the air, hanging from a rope-end over the Palace steps.

But now with the coming of freedom and Foscani all was changed. Even the name had been shorn from the Royal Palace of Montressor. It was now the Headquarters of the D.S.N. — the *Direction Supérieure Nationale* — and those who passed in and out of its great portals were plain men with little in their appearance to inspire wonder or attract interest.

As Nikko stood watching, a commotion behind made him turn his head.

A motor-car was approaching, bumping at snail's pace over the uneven cobbles. On either side of the

car were mounted members of the civil guard. A knot of men in a doorway pulled off their hats as it went by.

Nikko could not see the occupant or occupants of the car, which was almost entirely screened by the guard, but from the attitude of respect shown by the men in the doorway it was clearly evident that it contained a person or persons of importance.

The car drew nearer, until it was abreast of where Nikko stood. He caught a glimpse of a small red and black flag fluttering from the radiator cap.

One of the bodyguard, a huge low-browed Arnaut, detached himself from the escort and rode up to Nikko.

'Life and death!' he cried, 'do you not doff your hat to the man who has freed Sciriel? Are you blind that you do not recognise the Liberator?'

The Liberator could only mean Foscani. With quickened interest, Nikko uncovered and bowed ceremoniously.

'I did not know, brother. I have but yesterday arrived in Sciriel.'

The Arnaut scowled threateningly.

'Then you would do well to teach yourself its ways or you are likely to taste its justice.'

'How so?' Nikko demanded, for he had no liking for the man's tone. 'Does justice here reward ignorance with punishment?'

He spoke loudly and clearly, and at his words the Arnaut's jaw fell in amazement.

'Life and death!' he exclaimed, and again, 'Life and death!'

But Nikko was looking over the fellow's shoulder at the car, which had stopped.

A huge man in the back seat was leaning forward staring at him with eyes that were blank of expression.

A voice said softly: 'Let him be brought here, Serge.'

Two more of the civil guard spurred to Nikko's side, Serge grasped the bridle of his horse and another seized the leading rein of the pack mule.

Foscani was in profile when Nikko and his escort came to a halt beside the car. Save that his red, exquisitely chiselled mouth curled up at the corners, his face was expressionless and impassive. He was dressed from head to foot in black — a black fur cap, a black close-fitting frock coat with a high collar of Persian lamb, black breeches and black top boots of Russian leather. But for the breadth of his shoulders his head would have seemed unnaturally large. The lower part of his long body was as slender as a girl's. A pair of small white hands rested upon his knees. There was about the man a curiously feline tranquillity and poise.

'We have brought the fellow, Master,' said the Arnaut.

Foscani did not reply at once. It was his habit to leave an interval between the statements of those who addressed him and his answers.

Presently he said: 'Yes, yes.'

Then turned and looked at Nikko, his impassivity running into a smile, liquid as melting wax.

'And who are you?' he asked.

Nikko gave his name and country.

'From England. That is interesting — interesting. I have often wished to visit England. Perhaps some day I may do so.'

Nikko bowed.

'It will be a privilege we shall be swift to appreciate,' he said.

Foscani's eyes closed ever so little, under brows slightly raised.

'Irony,' he said, 'but how interesting! Since I came into power I had forgotten the existence of irony.'

Nikko saw that he had made a mistake in underestimating the intuition of his interrogator.

'I had no such thought——' he began, but Foscani laid a finger to his lips, which broke again into their cold smooth smile.

'Tss — tss. I would not have any man afraid. Have I not given my life that men may think, speak, and live freely?'

'That is a cause to which any man may be proud to give his life,' said Nikko.

'Quite so,' said Foscani, meticulously brushing a speck of dust from the sleeve of his coat. Then, after a pause: 'And what has brought you to Sciriel, Nicholasse Cheyne?'

'Love of adventure.'

'But the adventure is over, my friend, or nearly.'

'It will end when the July sun hardens the marshes of Plesna. Is that not so?'

Foscani's smile went — came and went again.

'So — you have already taken interest in our politics. You are not by chance a journalist.'

There was a quickened interest in the last half of the sentence.

'I read the posters,' said Nikko bluntly.

'Yes. It is what they are for,' said Foscani, and once more presented his profile. The palace clocks struck a chime. 'I will see you again, Nicholasse Cheyne. I must satisfy myself that your love of adventure does not bring you in contact with influences of the wrong kind. We will say at headquarters tomorrow at eleven.'

'My time is yours to command, sir,' said Nikko.

Foscani replied in English, spoken with soft sibilant drawl.

'Everything here iss mine to command, oh, yess.'

Picking up a cane, he touched his chauffeur lightly on the shoulder.

The car moved on, rocking and swaying over the uneven surface like a ship at sea.

4

In his last talk with Nikko, Mekla had given the name of the villa and street in Djevo where he had lived with his parents. But it was by a mere accident that Nikko, looking about him for lodgings for the night, espied the villa and recognised its name.

Leaving his horse and the mule tethered to the railings, he walked through an archway, across a small patio in which stood a waterless fountain, and addressed himself to the knocker. The door was opened by a very old man with such alacrity that Nikko was forced to the conclusion that keeping anybody waiting on the step was included in the endless chain of penal offences with which he was becoming familiar. The impression was heightened by the look of relief which, on seeing him, spread over the old man's features.

'Your pardon, sir,' said Nikko, 'but I was seeking a lodging, and being informed that it was the custom to ask at any house I ——'

'That is so,' said the old man, with nervous hospitality, 'and it so happens I have rooms and to spare. Enter. Enter.'

'I have a horse and a mule.'

'There is no stable, but if you will lead them to the garden at the rear of the house they will come to no harm and will, maybe, find a little grass to pull.'

So Nikko unhitched his traps and turned his beasts loose in a small plot of land from which all semblance of cultivation was fast disappearing.

Having put saddles and bridles under cover in a shed, he returned to the house, where the old man waited for him.

'My wife and I,' he said, 'are about to begin supper. If Monsieur, I should say comrade, will join us, we shall be honoured.'

The pathetic eagerness on the part of his host filled Nikko with a sense of shame. It was as if the old man had been shaken out of the habits of a lifetime and scared into an obedience unbecoming in one of his years. Uncomfortably Nikko blurted out:

'I feel ashamed, sir, to put you to all this trouble and inconvenience, but ——'

The old man silenced him with a gesture.

'There is no such thing as inconvenience,' he said. 'That is something that was, but is no longer. Monsieur, I fancy, must be a stranger.'

The pale watery eyes peered into Nikko's face.

He nodded, then said:

'But possibly not quite so much a stranger to you, sir. Is your name Mekla?'

'It is.'

'Not long since I knew your son.'

The colour faded from the old man's cheeks and his eyes stared.

'Merciful Lady! Then he lives?'

'He lives and is well.'

The old man waited for no more. With a thin piping cry he hurried down a long passage and disappeared through a doorway, whence, after voices, came, presently, the sound of a woman in tears.

Minutes passed before old Mekla returned. Approaching Nikko, he took both his hands and wrung them.

'You have been the bearer of news to his mother and myself that gives us courage to face whatever changes, for better or worse, may be in store for us. We had thought our son was dead. You will understand — the emotion — the gratitude.'

And very soon over the merest scrap of food, Nikko was telling these two old people all he could remember or invent about their son. With the knowledge that he was alive, they were unawed by the news that he had enlisted in the Foreign Legion.

They swelled with pride at Nikko's story of how he had slapped the chops of the Walloon bully and challenged him to fight.

'Louis would always bear himself gallantly,' said his mother. 'Had the force which is now at Plesna been banded before he was driven from the country, it is there our son would be this day.'

'Maman!' came warningly from her husband. 'If you were heard — if that were repeated.'

'It will not be repeated,' said Nikko, 'for save for one reason I am no better friend of this new freedom than I believe you two to be.'

Mekla leaned forward earnestly.

'Trust no one,' said he. 'Trust no one — for outside the gates of this city is a wall beside which are buried the bodies of those who trusted unwisely.'

'I have seen the place,' said Nikko.

But a woman will always take a risk before which a man will shrink. Mekla *mère* put her hands together, turned her eyes toward heaven, and cried aloud: 'God's vengeance on Foscani, the wrecker of this country! May he be stricken down into the flames of hell!'

The frenzy of patriotic indignation died out, to be succeeded by an unnatural composure.

'I am neglecting my duties,' she said; 'there is still broth and to spare.'

But Nikko had no mind to eat them out of house and home. He pushed back his chair and lit a cigarette.

'Tell me,' he said, 'this force at Plesna — of whom does it consist?'

'A handful of unarmed patriots, Monsieur, a thousand maybe. Royalists who escaped the massacre and have banded themselves together in a place where at this season they are secure from attack.'

A certain nervousness prompted Nikko's next question.

'But a force like that, what can they hope to achieve? The country is in the grip of the revolution. They would never succeed in restoring — the — the monarchy.'

Mekla nodded.

'That is true, for though there are already many malcontents who would welcome a return to the old régime — all the power is with Foscani. His are the arms, the transport, ammunition — he commands the one effective fighting force in the country.'

'Then it is all for nothing?' said Nikko.

'To die for loyalty is not nothing.'

It was the woman who spoke.

Nikko nodded, half-ashamed.

She went on:

'To die for loyalty is to give the best that is in one. No cause is nobler than the cause which cannot succeed.'

'So I thought once, Madam,' said Nikko, and was silent awhile. He shook himself out of a reverie and asked, 'One hears much talk of Foscani's Rifles, but I have seen no soldiery?'

Mekla smiled cynically.

'It is not a good advertisement for freedom for soldiers to be too much in evidence. Thus he keeps them camped five miles away, in the mountains — in the *polji* of Issoi, which lies below the great dam at Sarsanova. From time to time they receive orders and march north, south, east, or west, wheresoever some difficulty may have arisen that calls for swift adjustment. It is easy to tell where Foscani's Rifles have been, by the charred ruins of houses, by numerous fresh graves, and sometimes by the women one encounters who run screaming through empty streets as though pursued. Monsieur, of that force of five thousand rifles, not five per cent are Scirien-born. It is comprised of deserters from other countries — scourings from the Near East — Tartars, Turks, and Russians, the dregs and leavings from the Great War. There is not much in these times for which to thank God, but for that mercy I am grateful.'

After the meal Mekla produced a quarter-bottle of wine, which he measured faithfully into three glasses.

'With your consent, Monsieur, we will drink to our King in exile and the Princess Natalie.'

Nikko's hand shook as he carried the glass to his lips.

5

Nikko was up betimes next morning, and, after a cup of coffee and a slice of bread, he walked out into the city.

The summer was as yet young and the sunlight at the early hour was crystal clear. The white buildings of the city shone like gems against a sky of pale sapphire, whose colour was emphasised and refined by the tall black cypresses that thrust their pointed tops above the houses.

Nikko passed through the square and down a little

boulevard which funnelled abruptly to a bridge across the gorge. Here, with arms on the stone parapet he paused, looking down into the dark depths and listening to the chuckle and murmur of the water three hundred feet below. From the polished surface of the rocks high upon either side of the stream, it was easy to imagine that a torrent must have thundered through the gorge before the great dam at Sarsanova had been constructed.

The gorge was no wider than the toss of a biscuit.

On either side, built upon the very edges, were houses and public buildings and even a church. The cliff faces were stained and sullied with slops and drainage. Household refuse cast haphazard through open windows, was seized upon and squabbled over by innumerable ravens and jackdaws. It was an awe-inspiring place — a savage seam cut by Nature through a bit of civilisation.

At the sound of footsteps Nikko turned. A member of the civil guard was approaching. The fellow was eating an orange and none too prettily. He paused on the bridge, cocked an eye at Nikko, ejected from his mouth a gobbet of yellowish pulp, rasped his throat with a noisy slide, and demanded:

'Have you nothing to do that you stand idle at this hour of day?'

Nikko returned the stare with interest, and replied:

'Nothing, save an interview with the Liberator at eleven o'clock.'

The man's attitude changed instantly.

'Is that indeed so, comrade?'

'It is indeed,' said Nikko. 'Assuming that I do not slip on the peel you are dropping and break my neck.'

'Humph!' grunted the fellow, shrugged his shoulders doubtfully, and moved on. He was clearly dis-

gruntled by answers of this kind, and to soothe an injured pride he pitched a handful of half-chewed bits of orange at an old man, who with slow steps was coming toward him from the direction of the town.

With hands clenched and his muscles snapping with indignation, Nikko spun round to avenge the affront, and had covered half the distance between himself and the guard, when in a flash he recognised Baron Sidimir Vilasto. The old man was smiling with the utmost simplicity.

'I thank you, Monsieur le Garde,' he said, in the voice that Nikko remembered so well. 'That was kind — that was kind.' And, picking off a piece of the orange that adhered to the sleeve of his coat, he popped it into his mouth and chewed it with relish.

Nikko stopped in amazement. Was this the proud old aristocrat who seven years before had shown him the path of duty? Mekla had spoken the truth in saying that Vilasto was a child again. Yet it was unthinkable that he should accept, smilingly, insults from such a fellow, and like a scavenger dog swallow scraps that were tossed to him.

The guard laughed and passed on, and slowly over Vilasto's face came a change. With an exclamation of disgust he spat the orange from his mouth and ground it into the roadway under foot.

'Baron,' said Nikko. 'Baron Vilasto.'

At the sound of the voice, Vilasto had instantly resumed his expression of simplicity.

'Joy to you, sir,' he said. 'Joy to you this pleasant morning.'

'Baron,' Nikko repeated, 'don't you know me?'

For a moment Vilasto said nothing, but his pale eyes rested steadily upon Nikko's face.

'For my own part, I go to sit in the gardens yonder

— where no one ever comes. The sunlight is pleasant in the gardens.'

He passed on humming a bar of music as changeless in its note as the drone of an insect.

Nikko waited for perhaps ten minutes, then set off in pursuit.

Baron Vilasto was seated in a shady bower of rhododendrons in a public garden.

The childlike expression had vanished and his face, seemingly no older, was the face of the man Nikko had first met on that day of tragedy seven years before.

'So you have come back, Nicholas Cheyne,' said he, speaking in English, 'as in the end you were bound to do.'

Nikko seized his hand and wrung it fiercely.

'Tell me,' he said, 'she is well?'

Vilasto nodded.

'As well as may be, Cheyne. She will be glad to know you are here.'

'Will she?'

'Rest assured she will.'

'Oh, God!' said Nikko, and it seemed to him that all the treasures in the world's casket were held in his hands.

'Yes, I have expected you,' Vilasto went on. 'She, too, I think.'

'Did she ever speak —— ?' Nikko began.

'Not after that day — but she always remembered.'

'When can I see her?'

'You cannot. There is always a guard. We occupy now a suite on the top floor of that house which you see among the trees. She takes her exercise upon the roof. On the lower floors there is a permanent guard.'

Nikko moved to an open space which gave a clear view. When he came back his eyes burned brightly.

'I shall come,' he said, 'to-night. A cypress offers better cover than a poplar.'

Baron Vilasto smiled, but the smile waned.

'Why are you here — what is your purpose?'

'To take her away.'

A sudden eagerness came into the old man's face.

'Yes, Cheyne — do that. Sciriel is wrecked beyond hope of recovery. While she stays here, she can never be happy — never safe. Take her back with you — to England — teach her to forget — to be happy. In you alone is the power to make that possible. She gave you her love as a child — and what Natalie has given she never takes away. It is yours still — yours to realise. I have spent my life in courts and in high places among kings and queens, and I have seen my work and theirs crumble in a week into powder and fine dust. From this I have learnt one lesson — that, in Nature's plan, love is all that matters. Only love survives the test of time and the rude shocks of circumstance.' He paused. 'It is unwise that we risk being seen together. Believing me lost to reason, I am allowed to come and go where I will, and from time to time we may have a word in these gardens or elsewhere. For the rest, do nothing rashly or in haste. Foscani's arm is long and his grip is fierce and cruel.'

Nikko nodded.

'Trust me,' he said. 'I have already met Foscani — last night in the great square. This morning, at eleven, we are to meet again.'

'Then flatter,' said Vilasto. 'Not as a fool flatters — but wisely — cunningly. Foscani is like a cat only to be stroked one way. In flattery lies the road to his confidence. And remember this. That confidence is not to be won by brayings about freedom and equality — and the liberation of Sciriel from the yoke. You must

employ a subtler method. Show him that you have penetrated beneath the outward show to the real mind of the man who planned it — and who planned it for one purpose alone — the aggrandisement of himself. Good-bye, Cheyne.'

'Good-bye,' said Nikko. 'And you will tell her ——'

'I shall tell her you are here. There will be no need to say more than that.'

6

THE great hall of the D.S.N., the *Direction Supérieure Nationale*, was thronged with men of every condition.

Foscani had been receiving fortnightly reports from representatives of the various departments of Sciriel — those lesser controlling bodies — who under the imposing title of the *Délégation Régionale* carried out his will in the more distant provinces of the country. These gentlemen, who all talked at once and very loudly, wore the distinguishing mark of a bronze prunus flower in the buttonhole.

On stating his business, Nikko was conducted to an anteroom whose walls of delicate mosaic were freely plastered with the inevitable posters and Orders of the Day.

He had not long to wait before he was summoned into the presence of Foscani.

The Liberator was reclining upon a long couch in an attitude suggesting a male edition of the picture of Madame Récamier. Between his fingers was a long cigarette-holder made of straw.

A vast buhl table covered with papers stood near French windows which opened upon a flight of steps leading into a terraced garden which ran to the edge of the gorge. The room was scantily but choicely furnished and gave the impression that its present owner was not averse to comfort.

Into the walls, which were of pale satinwood, nails had been driven from which hung an odd assortment of weapons — three or four knives, a revolver, and a bayonet.

These attracted Nikko's attention as he entered the room.

'Interesting, are they not?' said Foscani; 'and each has a history — and the owner of each of these weapons is dead.'

'How very sad,' said Nikko without emotion.

'Yes. One and all were used in various unsuccessful attempts to take my life. I keep them there, not, as many believe, to protect myself, but as souvenirs. The small automatic at the end of the top row was the property of the late King. You know, of course, that he was hanged.'

'By your orders?'

'What a foolish question!' said Foscani; 'all orders are my orders. Will you take a glass of Slivovica? It is a spirit made from prunes and said by many to be an acquired taste. For my part I find it most intriguing.'

'Why, then,' said Nikko, 'I shall be certain to like it.'

Foscani laughed his smooth, trickling laugh.

'Yes,' he said. 'You are what they call in England a cheeky fellow, Cheyne. You make an agreeable change from the men one meets every day.'

Nikko nodded.

'I have always thought,' he said, 'that one of the disadvantages of a revolution is that one is driven to chop off the heads of the most amusing and intelligent people.'

'Extraordinarily true,' said Foscani, and for the first time his smile bore an actual trace of humour. 'It is

curious that I never thought of that myself. I take it that in England you still refuse to acknowledge the likelihood that some of your most enlightened intellects may suffer extinction from a similar cause.'

'I have not been in England since before the war, but I imagine they still feel fairly secure,' Nikko replied.

Foscani shook his head.

'The country has been badly run,' he said. 'The right man has not been in charge — nor has the right moment been chosen. Tell me, Cheyne, for your opinion would be valuable, can you see the slightest fault in the manner in which I have run the revolution in Scirie?'

'I have been here hardly long enough — to — to judge.'

'No, no, of course, but reflect upon the timing of the whole thing. It was perfect. The switch from royalism to republicanism was done in a single night. The minimum of propaganda was employed, and when it was necessary to strike, the blow was swift and final. I assure you, as a revolution, Cheyne, it was without equal in the history of Europe.'

'If the look of terror on the faces of the people may be taken as a guide,' said Nikko, 'I should say that you are probably right.'

'Yes,' said Foscani slowly, 'but your phrases are not of the happiest.'

'Then let me amend what I said and add that the revolution has been an unparalleled personal success — for you.'

Foscani gave a gentle purr of satisfaction.

'Directly we met,' said he, 'I recognised you as a man of courage and insight. As I myself possess both in a large measure, I cannot resist the appeal they make to me. You will sit down, Cheyne.'

Up to that moment Nikko had been standing. He drew up a chair, sat down, and helped himself uninvited to a cigarette.

'And you may smoke,' Foscani added, with a touch of satire.

'Then perhaps you will be good enough to give me a match,' said Nikko.

Foscani was genuinely surprised.

'Upon my life!' said he. 'Your effrontery is too engaging. But that I have your word for it to the contrary, I would find it difficult to believe you are not an American. It is, I suppose, the profession of journalism which has given you so bold a front.'

Nikko thought for a moment, then broke into a light laugh.

'It defeats me how you found it out,' he said.

Foscani moved his shoulders luxuriously.

'All professions have their trade-mark,' said he. 'And when I see an Englishman who looks like a soldier, I assume at once that he is a journalist and I am seldom at fault. You do not deny it?'

Nikko shook his head.

'Why should I? It is as good as any other profession.'

'As some other professions,' Foscani amended. 'For what paper do you write? *The Times?*'

'I am a free lance,' Nikko replied.

'And you are wise. Freedom is a great asset. You will find much material for your pen here in Sciriel.'

'I have already begun to do so,' said Nikko, and bowed ever so slightly, but with point. 'My meeting with you last evening in the Square was a happy omen. Many men have written of the gigantic discomforts of a political change, but not many have the fortune to come into contact with the brain that has caused the change.'

Foscani made no pretence of disguising his pleasure at these words. Like a great cat he stretched his limbs.

'You may ask me what you like, Cheyne,' said he.

'Then I shall ask for freedom to move about Sciriel as I please and observe what there is to be observed.'

'You shall have it. But it is here at the fountain-head that all that is worth while takes place. I imagine that your interests deal more with personalities than politics.'

'Very much more.'

'Then are there no personal questions you wish to ask?'

Nikko thought for a while.

'Questions about yourself?' he queried.

'By all means.'

Again Nikko paused. At last he said:

'Yes, there are several things I should be glad to know. Firstly, are you going to be satisfied with the extent of your victory here?'

'Now that,' said Foscani, 'is an exceptionally shrewd question and one that I frequently ask myself. I think the answer is no. I tell you this quite openly, secure in the knowledge that were you to repeat it, you would be arraigned as a traitor and shot for spreading slander against myself as Chairman of the D.S.N. I have no doubt whatever that the Republic of Sciriel has come to stay — but whether I shall stay as nominal head of the Republic is another matter.'

'Fresh laurels?'

'Why not? What a man has done once he can do again.' He took a sip from his glass and closed his eyes, the better to savour the sweet spirit. 'Yes. I might reappear at the head of a similar movement in — Brussels, Berlin, or say London — who knows?'

'We may meet again in Buckingham Palace.'

'It is not impossible,' said Foscani, and the statement was unrelieved even by a vestige of humour. 'Of course, there is a great deal to be done here before I should contemplate a move. For example, I am unmarried.'

Nikko kept his features under severe control.

'Is that,' he said, 'a disadvantage? I have heard that marriage dulls a man's ambition.'

Foscani rolled a little to one side and, staring at the ceiling, fingered the soft white folds of flesh beneath his chin, with a caressing touch.

'It depends,' said he. 'Very often marriage is the only flux for welding rival factions that otherwise are inimical. If, for example, I were to marry the lady who was once Princess Natalie of Sciriel — my position in this country would become unassailable.'

Foscani's eyes were upon the ceiling when he spoke these words. Nikko Cheyne, his face scarlet and every muscle twitching, walked to the window and looked out. That he had succeeded in controlling himself was little short of a miracle, for a murderous desire to kill Foscani there and then was blazing in his brain like a fire.

Outside in the garden, one of the guard, a revolver in his belt, marched to and fro between the foot of the steps and the railings protecting the gorge. It was well that Nikko had had the forethought to leave his pistol at Mekla's house before setting out for the palace. But for that, something very mad and hopeless might have taken place. And then perhaps another trophy would have been added to Foscani's little collection — or perhaps Foscani would have gone to that place where a man is denied the pleasure of bringing with him souvenirs collected during his earthly career.

'You say nothing,' said Foscani, 'yet surely the idea cannot fail to commend itself to a person of your intelligence.'

'If I said nothing,' Nikko replied, 'it was because I thought you were jesting, Foscani. How could a Communist wed the daughter of a King?'

'Perhaps,' was the answer, 'by becoming a King himself. I recall the case of a certain Corsican of humble origin who did not hesitate to change the cockade for a crown. I have yet to be convinced that the Corsican was a better man than I am.'

For a moment, Nikko's anger faded in amazement before the gigantic egotism of this sleek creature, whose unbounded conceit and self-belief had plunged this little country into ruin and disaster. Nikko returned to his chair and lit another cigarette, with fingers that trembled and set the flame flickering.

Misreading the cause of his visitor's emotion, Foscani laughed and said:

'That surprised you, Cheyne, but I wonder why. In this country with a population of three quarters of a million, have I found one man with an intellect equal to my own? Have I found one man with courage enough or power enough to stand up against me? No. And why? Because in all Sciriel there is neither a better brain nor finer nerves than mine. Am I to be blamed, then, if sometimes I ask myself if what I have found in Sciriel I should not also find to be the case in the rest of Europe? Well, we have had a delightful talk. Come and see me again — and often. To-day, I have shown myself as a private individual — later you shall have the opportunity to judge of me in my public capacity. This may provide you with fresh surprises.' He spoke with superb arrogance, as though all he had said was so, beyond question.

Nikko rose.

'I should like, if I may be allowed,' said he, 'to make a pencil drawing of you.'

Foscani's delight was unbounded.

'Yes, yes,' he said, as eagerly as a shopgirl on a holiday responds to the solicitations of a pier photographer. 'I had no notion you could draw. Yes — indeed you shall — and if it is a success, it shall hang here over my table.'

'I must make it a success,' said Nikko, and bowed.

Before going, he was given, by Foscani's orders, an exoneration pass.

'Which means,' said Foscani, 'that you are free to do what you please and go where you please, and that no one is empowered to employ your services upon work for the State. A great privilege, Cheyne, and one that is seldom accorded. Good-day — return again soon.' He waved a white hand and, with a kind of sudden intensity, sprang to his feet and immersed himself in a great pile of papers and correspondence that littered the table.

7

THERE was a curfew in Djevo which sounded at half-past nine each night. After its notes had died away, no one was allowed in the streets on pain of arrest. But, curfews notwithstanding, it was not until after eleven that Nikko set forth from the Meklas' house. He had determined that he would present his pass, if unlucky enough to meet a patrol; on the other hand, he very much hoped to cross the bridge and reach the gardens unnoticed. The streets were stone dark, for at the time of the revolution the Loyalists had wrecked the main power station at Sarsanova so effectively that it had not since been put into working order. Wearing soft

shoes, keeping in the shadow of the houses, and darting into doorways at the slightest sound, Nikko contrived to reach his objective without a soul being the wiser. Through the gardens he ran and did not stop until he reached a small plantation before the house in which Bettany was a captive. Here, with a pummelling heart, he crouched down to prospect. Against the night sky the cypress trees looked like black umbrellas leaning point upward against the wall. The climb, so far as Nikko could judge, would be child's play compared with that which seven years before he had so lightly undertaken.

But a difficulty presented itself in the person of a civil guard, who, regular as clockwork, marched up and down before the railings of the house. The man's beat extended about seventy-five yards from the front door, covering an area between two narrow lanes and having the house as its central point. Between where Nikko was concealed and the railing of the house stretched a wide white road. The chances of crossing it and scaling the railings without being seen were remote, and Nikko, albeit reluctantly, dismissed from his mind the agreeable alternative project of nipping across the road, concealing himself in the lane, and knocking the man out when he should arrive at the end of his beat. That the man was employed in guarding the house to prevent the Princess from getting out was excuse enough to justify extremes. On the other hand, it would be folly to pursue a course that might so easily lead to disaster.

Mastering his impatience to the best of his ability, Nikko moved silently away and, making a wide détour, approached the house from the rear.

Here there was no guard and Nikko made short work of scaling the garden wall. The garden was deserted

and its hedged-in walks and vine pergolas afforded plentiful cover.

From some room on the ground floor of the house came the sound of men's voices and the clink of glass tankards. The guard were making merry. The more row they made, the better they would serve Nikko's purpose.

He looked up. In a top-floor window a light was burning — just to be seen through a crossed blind.

Nikko buttoned his coat and pulled his cap down over his brow to keep twigs, bits of bark, and lichen from his eyes, then, hoisting himself up by the lowest limb, disappeared into the black core of the cypress.

Save for the density of branches and foliage, the climb was nothing. The top of the tree rose high above the roof, and, with the aid of a supple rubber-like bough, he swung across a narrow gap and dropped lightly upon the leads. Careful to avoid showing his silhouette against the sky, he crouched low beneath the parapet and looked about him. The roof was flat and grey, save at one point, where a thin wedge of light marked a half-open trap-door. On hands and knees Nikko crawled toward the light, raised the trap, and dropped, without a sound, into a candle-lit passage.

Here for a full minute he stood, motionless and listening, one hand on the rail of a baluster and the other on his throat, which was throbbing, throbbing. Swept by waves of an emotion that robbed him of the power to move, he waited — scarcely breathing — while slowly the realisation of her nearness gathered force within him.

What he should say to her when they met, he did not know. It was pitiful to think that after seven years, he should come to her unprepared. Without even a handful of flowers to speak for him. Would she have changed

— would time and tragedy have set up a barrier between them?

From far below came the rumbling notes of the men's voices — here on this floor, it was silent like a hill-top. Beneath a doorway a few yards distant a pencil of light beckoned.

Nikko filled his lungs and, tiptoeing down the passage, opened the door — wide.

A chair scraped — a faint exclamation and he and Bettany were face to face.

She had risen when the door opened and stood very still with hands crossed over her breasts and her eyes wide open.

For a space neither moved, then her hands flickered out to him.

'Nikko!' she said. 'Nikko!'

He moved toward her, stopped wordless with a gesture meaning anything — or nothing — half-laughed, awkward as a schoolboy, and was on his knees with arms about her and his face buried in the folds of her wrap.

'Nikko,' she repeated, and stooping took his head in her hands and rubbed her cheek against his hair.

Baron Vilasto passed noiselessly from the room.

Nikko's arms relaxed, and the lovers who had been separated for seven years looked at and filled their eyes with each other.

At last:

'You're lovelier, Bettany,' he said. 'Much lovelier.'

And this was true.

'You are the same Nikko,' she said; 'unchanged except — so tidy about the head. Where have you been — and what done since — then?'

'I've been waiting,' he answered simply.

'Then you believed.'

'What else could it have been for?'

'I know,' she nodded. 'Sit here with me.' And led him to a couch.

'I knew you would come — I felt it, Nikko. But I knew, too, you would be strong enough to stay away — while there was a need.'

'That's over, Bettany.'

At the sound of his name for her she smiled — then shuddered a little.

'Don't, Nikko — or I'll feel it's wicked to be happy as I am now.'

'You were made for happiness,' he said.

'And you to make me so.' Her hand caressed his arm and brushed the lichen from his sleeve. She smiled into his eyes. 'From climbing, Nikko. There used to be twigs and tree-dust in your hair. Remember? You have always climbed to me.'

'Until you were carried up beyond my reach, Bettany ——'

Her forehead clouded.

'Our last day, Nikko — the pain — it was —— Nothing has ever been the same since.'

'Now,' he whispered, 'it's the same again now — and better.'

With a quick movement she slipped from his embrace and stood away from him, staring at the flame of a candle.

'Is it? Can it be? I want to say so, too — and believe it.' Her voice was trembling with passion. 'For I do believe it — you force me to believe it. But doesn't that make me a traitor — a traitor, Nikko?'

'A traitor — you?' he repeated, and took her hands in his.

'Listen,' she went on. 'They've been unhappy years, Nikko. I felt the real woman that was me was cheated, denied. I was a Princess who would be a

Queen. That should have been future enough — but it wasn't. And sometimes, Nikko, I've prayed that I might forget the one being in my life who taught me it could never be enough — you. Sciriel seemed so small a kingdom beside the one we found together on a Paris roof-top.'

'It is — my dear — my love,' he said.

'So I was disloyal in my heart, Nikko. Wasn't worthy of my place.' With the back of her hand she brushed her forehead. 'When the revolution came — with its terror and massacre — the fighting in the streets — the change — and everything lost, I knew that the whole of my world had been swept away. Nikko, I ought to have died under that, for my pride I ought to have died — yet — and this is why I call myself a traitor, though part of me may have died — a hope, Nikko — the greatest hope in the world — was reborn. My uncle, the King, they hanged early one morning. My father was King for half a day until those who called him King were shot down defending the gates of our house. But that night I was a woman — do you understand, Nikko?'

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'and you have told me something more wonderful than I ever dared to hope. I've prayed myself, Bettany, for power to forget the woman who was a Princess, but it was no use. And now the whole future is our own.'

There was something savage, impulsive, compelling in her reply.

'It must be — must be — must be, Nikko.'

'It is,' he answered.

But even though for a long while she lay silent in his arms, the cloud of doubt that had settled between her brows did not pass away.

Baron Vilasto tapped lightly on the door.

8

For the better part of three hours, they discussed ways and means of escape.

Bettany took little part in the discussion, but sat on the sofa hugging her knees and staring over the heads of the two men with eyes that seemed to scan a wider field than was margined by the walls of the little room.

Once she spoke with sudden fervour:

'So long as the Loyalists are in the Forest of Plesna, I shall stay in Sciriel.'

'But Bettany ——' Nikko began.

Baron Vilasto intervened.

'If you do that, my child, every man there will be done to death.'

'But they believe in me, Sidimir, and with my father in prison — dying, perhaps.'

He nodded gravely.

'That is very true, but reflect a moment. The cause they represent we know is hopeless. Yet so long as you are here, they will fight for that cause to the last breath. When the marshes dry next month, Foscani will send his Rifles to Plesna and there will be a fine killing — and massacre. With your father, King Carelon, imprisoned at Plevi, if the news were brought to them of your escape, their cause would cease to have existence. The Direction has already promised them freedom if voluntarily they surrender. Without you they would surrender. Think, then, what depends on your choice. If you abdicate, they are free; if you refuse to abdicate — they will die to a man. My dear, there can be but one answer to that problem.'

'No,' said Bettany, 'there are two,' and she looked swiftly at Nikko. 'They would not be the first to put sacrifice before self.'

'The choice is in your hands.'

'Suppose,' she said, 'I leave the choice in theirs?'

Vilasto did not give a direct answer.

'There has already been so much killing in Sciriel,' said he. 'Are we to have more? Are we so to act that we leave in this country scarcely a drop of the old blood unspilled. Look into the future, my dear. You, who are now a woman, think as a Princess thinks. Now and for a while to come Sciriel will writhe in the grip of the Commune, but in the years ahead, if all that was best is not stamped out, surely it will rise to the surface again. For the sake of what the future may bring, give these Loyalists their lives, Natalie.'

'Is it you, Sidimir, who speaks so?' she answered. 'You who day by day in a thousand subtle ways have helped to swell the ranks of those gallant gentlemen at Plesna?'

'That is true,' Vilasto nodded, 'but you are young and I am old — and with the old lifelong habits are not easily changed.'

Bettany looked at Nikko.

'Do you know of all that he has done since the revolution, Nikko? Of how, pretending himself to be simple and lost to reason, he has daily risked his life that the Royalist cause should not perish.'

'I did not know, Bettany, but I guessed, I think.'

'And now he asks me to abandon a cause that but for him would already have perished.'

Vilasto waved a hand.

'You make too much of this,' he said. 'What have I done but show to a few hotheads a track through the marshes? I did this to protect them from themselves. Here they would have been shot as traitors — at Plesna, at least for a few months, they were out of harm's way.'

'Bettany,' Nikko pleaded, 'if nothing can come of this save disaster — follow his advice and come with me. The death of these men can only add a fresh horror to a score already long enough.'

But Bettany bit her red young mouth and shook her head.

'I want to come, Nikko, I want to come. But convince me, if you can, I should be right to do so.'

Nikko lowered his voice.

'I can do that, Bettany, and show you there is no other choice.'

Then he told them what had passed that morning between Foscani and himself, quoting the words he had used.

'I had been waiting for that,' said Vilasto, and his face was grey with anger.

Bettany had risen and was walking up and down the little room.

'That murderer!' she whispered. 'I would kill myself, Sidimir.' She stopped and faced them. 'You are right — you win. Show me the way, Nikko, I'll go with you.'

He nodded.

'Then hold yourself ready. I will send you word by Vilasto. With good horses we should be able to reach the Solji Pass in a day and a night, and with two or three loyal fellows we should be able to make short work of the frontier guards. And then freedom, Bettany.'

But fresh misgivings were at work.

'There is my father,' she said. 'Am I to leave him to die in the salt pits at Plevi?'

The two men looked at one another in silence and very slightly Vilasto shook his head.

'Very well, Bettany,' said Nikko, 'I will go to Plevi.'

And hearing him say that, Bettany caught up his hands and pressed them against her cheek.

Before Nikko left, Vilasto gave him an address in the city.

'We speak of it as "The House of Friends," Cheyne. To be sure of a welcome, you have but to say "Plesna" to whosoever opens the door.'

9

In every community which has undergone violent political changes are to be found small sections of persons who, while outwardly in agreement with the new order, cherish in the privacy of their own opinions allegiance to the old. From a variety of reasons, prudence, slow-thinking temperament, or sometimes for merely material reasons, it is not always easy for a man to declare unswerving devotion to a cause and be prepared at a moment's notice to sacrifice his future or his life to further its prosperity. Many loyal citizens of Sciriel had suffered hardships in the famine that had followed the war, and these hardships, though not enough to shatter their faith in the old constitution, were enough to slow down quick-tempered patriotism and cause them to deliberate before offering open defiance to the revolution.

It was from this source that the body of Loyalists at Plesna had been recruited and it was into this community that Nikko found an entrance through The House of Friends.

Ostensibly, The House of Friends was no more than an ordinary dwelling-house, being one of those built on the edge of the gorge, but underneath its modest rooms and passages was a series of cellars and tunnels cut out of the naked rock, where nightly by twos and threes men congregated to speak their minds freely,

to discuss the oppression of Foscani and ways and means by which that oppression might be circumvented.

Here the younger bloods kept wrist and eye in training with the foils. The sword had been the national weapon of Sciriel, but since the revolution it had fallen into disuse. The old manner of settling a dispute by steel in honourable fashion was upon the index of offences. Every so often The House of Friends would lose one of its members, and the night after his going, it had become a custom to drink a toast and breathe a silent prayer that his footsteps might be guided safely across the marsh.

In this secret and changing company, Nikko found a welcome. He was accepted as a trustworthy ally and was made free of their councils. Even the most private councils were not silenced by his approach. Vilasto's recommendation removed all doubts. The older men liked his air of gravity and absorption, and the younger, with whom he was ever ready to cross swords in a friendly bout, were full of praise for his dash, the swiftness of his eye, and his whirlwind attacks before which their superior skill was relentlessly overborne.

'A gentleman and a fighter,' they said of him. Also that there was the 'colour of courage' in his eyes.

Nikko had paid his way at The House of Friends, for, learning that the force of Plesna was half-starved, he had given a letter, addressed to Joris Howard, and authorising him to spend any money required for the relief of the Royalists. On the face of it this seemed likely to prove of little use, but a rumour had started that it might be possible for supplies to be smuggled over the great snow ranges that flanked the Forest of Plesna, but that since the State had confiscated all moneys, the effort had not been made. A bold spirit at

The House of Friends had volunteered to get the letter across the marsh to the Duke of Svorzo.

It had not needed much reflection to convince Nikko that the task he had set himself to rescue simultaneously Bettany and her father would call for infinite care and preparation.

He and she together, with fortune on their side, might well have succeeded in making a dash for the frontier, but to contrive the escape of King Carelon from the walled and guarded penal settlement of the salt pits at Plevi was an undertaking of very much greater difficulty.

From his knowledge of the country, meticulously acquired both before and since his arrival in Sciriel, Nikko knew Plevi to lie about ten miles due south of the leech-gatherer's cottage where he had passed his first night in the state. From Plevi to the frontier stretched an uninterrupted forest, fifteen miles in depth. That forest before the war had been bisected with grassy rides, but the rides, Nikko learnt, had been neglected and were so overgrown as to be impassable.

It would be necessary, therefore, if by hook or by crook he could succeed in bringing about the escape of the King, for them to ride along the eastern fringe of the forest to some rendezvous at or near the leech-gatherer's cottage.

At this rendezvous he would arrange that Bettany and her loyal escort should be waiting. Thence they would ride without stop to the Solji Pass. The final stages of the adventure would be with the frontier guard. From what Nikko had seen of their quality as marksmen and as soldiers he had little doubt of his ability to overcome their resistance.

Bettany and her father would remain in the shelter of the lower road until that skirmish had been brought

to a satisfactory conclusion. At a signal that all was well, they would join their escort and pass over the frontier to safety.

In theory, the plan was simple enough, but there was much to do before it could be put to the test.

What Nikko least liked in the whole business was the knowledge that the rescue of Bettany from Djevo would have to be carried out by others, since he himself would be engaged in organising the escape of the King.

To Vilasto, he confided a rough outline of the scheme, and next day, at their rendezvous in the gardens, the old statesman brought Bettany's answer.

'Tell him I shall be ready to do whatever he says — but that I can trust my father's safety only to him.'

Nikko complained bitterly, but in his heart he knew her choice was inevitable. It remained then to find in Djevo four trustworthy fellows upon whose loyalty he could rely unswervingly.

It was at The House of Friends that he sought and found them.

Nikko had not spent seven years with the Legion without acquiring the knack of forming swift estimates of a man's qualities.

On his first night in the cellars, he had been attracted to the brothers Festubert, and as he came to know them better his liking increased.

Raoul and Jean Festubert were as like one another as two lengths of whipcord. Differing from the usual run of Sciriens, for Sciriens are a stocky race, they were tall, lithe, and had the figures of cavalrymen. Their wide-set eyes were square-lidded and full of a laughing insolence that at the least offence turned into dangerous anger. Both were brilliant swordsmen and held

distinguished records for their services in the Great War. And both were quite fearless.

Their plans were already made for joining the Loyalists at Plesna when Nikko approached them with his scheme. Until he was certain of their loyalty, Nikko did not say for whom he sought to enlist their aid. He gave them to understand that it was an undertaking of tremendous importance and of great hazard.

Hearing this, the brothers smiled and thrust out their long legs luxuriously.

'A woman, of course,' said Raoul.

Nikko nodded.

'I am seeking,' he said, 'some gentlemen who have no objection to being shot.'

'As to that,' remarked Jean smilingly, 'all gentlemen object to being shot, but in such a community as this it becomes almost inevitable.'

'Just so,' said Raoul. 'Convince us that this affair is no less worthy than the cause of those who are at Plesna and our services are yours to command.'

Nikko thought for a moment.

'I have heard,' said he, 'that before the revolution, the Princess Natalie did not lack for willing escort when she walked abroad. I have further heard that there was not a true citizen who would not very gladly have laid down his life for her.'

Simultaneously, the two brothers were upon their feet.

'We have heard enough,' said Raoul.

And Jean, the younger of the two, bowed his head as though in the presence of his sovereign.

'You will help, Messieurs?'

'To the death,' they answered.

They sat then and talked in low voices.

'When is this to be?'

Nikko shrugged his shoulders.

'I cannot as yet say,' and he told them of his plans in regard to the King.

Jean whistled.

'In faith,' he said, 'you have set yourself a task, Monsieur, and from what I know of Plevi it is one that offers little hope of success.'

'We shall see,' said Nikko grimly.

Raoul Festubert peered into Nikko's face and nodded approval. He had seen that Nikko was not a man easily to accept failure.

'Then we are to ride with the Princess to the leech-gatherer's hut by the Svorzo Forest and await your coming with the King?'

Nikko nodded.

Jean's curiosity overcame him.

'And after that, Monsieur. After that, do we ride in her company to Plesna?'

Nikko hesitated. There was in Jean's tone an eagerness that a true answer to the question would inevitably turn to dismay and disappointment. Already the young man was visualising a triumphant reunion of King Carelon and his daughter with that gallant handful of subjects who defied the revolution.

What would they say if he told them the sequel to this glorious adventure? Would it not kill the enthusiasm that in itself would contribute so much toward the success of the scheme? Vilasto's argument of mercy would not prevail. Unlike himself, these men had nothing to gain by Bettany's freedom, nor by her father's. They would see only a bitter anticlimax to their patriotic endeavour. The Royal House would have deserted its own cause.

For the first time since Nikko had set his mind upon gaining for Bettany her freedom, a shadow of doubt

and of misgiving assailed him. He understood now with what reluctance she viewed the thought of flight from this country, which, for all its political chaos and disaffection, was, in spirit, still her own. Yet, their love for one another and all selfishness apart, every argument of prudence, of charity, and of common sense pointed the need for her to do so.

Nikko looked at the eager faces before him, and replied:

'After that, Messieurs, we shall obey royal orders.'

Jean Festubert put an affectionate hand on his brother's knee and smiled confidently.

'And now,' said Nikko, 'I shall want two fellows like yourselves equally trustworthy to complete her escort.'

Jean and Raoul were not overjoyed to share with others the honour that was to be theirs, but it took but little argument to persuade them of the need.

'True,' they admitted, 'we must take no risks,' and devoted their thoughts to the problem of who best might be chosen.

Eventually it was decided that Max Gourod and Pierre Kressin were a sound choice.

'Good horsemen both. And Max shoots as prettily with a pistol as with a rifle.'

'There is one trouble that I foresee,' said Raoul. 'The matter of obtaining horses. Foscan has requisitioned every hack and hunter in the country to mount his cavalry or civil guards.'

Nikko laughed.

'Why, then,' said he, 'we shall have to requisition what we require from them.'

Roaul clapped his thigh heartily.

'Excellent,' said he. 'Give me a day or two to think it over and I will evolve something amusing in that direction.'

'That can wait,' said Nikko, 'until I have solved the more difficult problem at Plevi.'

Raoul shook his head.

'I take leave to question that,' he said. 'Once we have secured horses, there are a number of quiet places where they could be concealed until wanted. There is no point in leaving everything to the last minute.'

Nikko left the two brothers staring reflectively at what served in that place for a ceiling. He had never seen two young men who looked more completely happy.

10

FOSCANI reclined upon his couch, the cigarette-holder between his fingers, and his eyes resting languidly upon the back of Nikko's drawing-board.

'Are you honoured, Cheyne,' he enquired, 'that I devote so much of my time to you?'

'You do no such thing,' Nikko replied. 'You devote it to a very indifferent portrait of yourself.'

Foscani yawned.

'In a sense that is true,' he said, 'but I like the drawing well enough. It has character even though it lacks something in the way of style.'

'A portrait should be an honest statement,' said Nikko, scoring in a line to mark the thick fold of flesh beneath the chin.

But Foscani was not watchful for satire. He had accepted Nikko's habit of using awkward phrases as part of a personality that interested and amused him.

'I have more time to spare now,' said he. 'Things are settling—are becoming more normal—too normal. A little while ago my days were full—but now I lie at ease while you draw. Dullness does not suit me, Cheyne.'

'Yesterday,' said Nikko, 'you sentenced six men to be shot—this morning that sentence was carried out. Yet you complain of dullness.'

'Why not? Death is a common occurrence. And there is little in justice, save in so far as the ability to wield it is a statement of power, to rouse a man's enthusiasm.'

Nikko went on drawing in silence. For three days, for an hour each day he had worked at the drawing, inspired by a malicious determination to set on paper the curious mixture of energy and ease in the face of his sitter. In those hours, Foscani was free with his confidence to a point of indiscretion.

With unflinching candour he spoke his mind, each day revealing fresh facets of a nature that glittered with self-admiration and conceit.

Nikko did not hurry over the portrait, since it afforded him an unrivalled opportunity for keeping in touch with Foscani and becoming acquainted with his plans. Sometimes he dusted out a morning's work as casually as though Foscani's time were a matter of no moment whatsoever. But Foscani smiled and applauded what he was pleased to call 'a charming insolence.'

'And how,' he asked, 'do you pass your time in Sciriel, Cheyne?'

'Mainly,' Nikko replied, 'in observing the effects of your administration and marvelling at the stupidity of people who allow their natural freedom to be so completely suppressed.'

'You are wrong to use the word "stupidity," Cheyne. You should say fear. It is upon stupidity all revolutions are founded, but it is by the force of fear they are maintained.'

'Djevo is certainly a city of fear,' Nikko agreed.

Foscani raised one of his sleek hands and held it poised. In his eyes shone the light of a growing anger.

'They fear,' he said, 'but not enough. Already men talk mischievously among themselves. There are undercurrents. One may control the actions of a people, but it is very hard to control their private thoughts. One of these days, Cheyne, I shall surprise Djevo — give it a jolt it will have cause to remember. It is a mistake to be too merciful.'

There was a knock at the door.

'Yes — enter,' said Foscani.

'The hour is up,' said the man. 'Already the anteroom is full of people who are waiting.'

Foscani moved irritably. He did not like to be interrupted.

'Mordo can see them,' he said. 'Who is there?'

The man reeled off a number of names.

'Nothing important. No one else, Simon?'

'The Governor of the pits at Plevi.'

Nikko started.

'Yes,' said Foscani, 'I told him he might come. Wait.' Then, turning to Nikko, 'We were talking of surprises. It would interest you to see the instrument with which I effect my surprises?'

'Very much,' said Nikko.

Foscani turned again to the man who stood by the door.

'You will order two horses to be saddled. At once. Also my escort.'

Simon nodded.

'And the Governor of the pits?'

'I will see him now.'

Foscani moved to the window and was presenting his back when a short thick-set officer of middle age, wearing a uniform of dark blue with the red and black

sash of the revolution, was shown into the room. Finding himself in the presence of his Chief, he saluted, clicked heels, and stood to attention.

'I do not care for these soldierly accomplishments,' said Foscani, addressing the sunlit garden. 'They savour of a state of affairs which, thanks to me, no longer exists. If you please, Savarin, you will omit the flourish when next we meet.'

Major Savarin made no reply, but Nikko observed the colour mount to his cheeks and darken his temples. In the silence between Foscani's last remark and his next, Nikko was given ample opportunity for studying the man to whose mercy Bettany's father had been entrusted. There was about the face a certain fierceness, superimposed over contours naturally weak and indeterminate. The mouth was the best feature — but it was the mouth of an obstinate rather than a strong man. Tufty eyebrows gave a threatening aspect to a pair of mild eyes. The furrows that seamed his low brow excited the impression that they had been brought about by perplexity rather than through the processes of thought. On the whole it was a more human face than Nikko expected to find in a man holding the position of Governor of Plevi.

Foscani continued to stare at the garden throughout a long and embarrassing silence. His voice when at last he spoke was as sharp and hard as chipped ice.

'You have a complaint to make, Savarin — what complaint? You are in charge at Plevi with authority to take what steps are necessary. Why then am I to be worried? Is it because you are unequal to your responsibilities? If so — tell me — and I will make a change. Now — at once. The State has no use for inefficient servants. Are you inefficient, Savarin?'

'Not to my knowledge,' was the guarded reply.

'Not to your knowledge. But who should know your shortcomings better than you yourself? Eh? Answer.'

The Governor of Plevi took courage and squared his shoulders.

'I have not come,' he said, 'to complain about myself.'

'What immodesty!' said Foscani, a smile spreading over the lower half of his face. 'You prefer to leave that to my better judgment, eh?'

'I am here to complain of the conditions at the pits,' said Savarin stoutly.

Foscani sat down at his table and, picking up a sheaf of papers, played upon them with his lips.

'You hear that, Cheyne?' said he. 'It is amusing. There appears to be discomfort in our penal settlements.' In a flash he spun round on Savarin. 'Conditions!' he stormed. 'You fool, for what else are offenders sent to Plevi but to have reason to complain of the conditions?'

'If it is the intention that men should die,' Savarin replied, 'why are they not shot before a wall? I do my duty at Plevi as a servant of the State, but I do not count it my duty to stand by while men starve for lack of food.'

'So,' said Foscani, 'it is to ask for a more liberal diet for your charges that you have come here.'

'My orders were that the mines were to be worked. Men do not work who can barely stand from weakness. For the last month they have been dying ten a day.'

'I have read the statistics from Plevi. You need not waste my time repeating them,' said Foscani. 'As a good patriot, you should have no sentiment for enemies of the State. It would be a pity, Savarin, if your amiable intentions were misunderstood.'

For one moment the Governor of Plevi stood biting his lip in impotent anger. Then his mouth shut like a trap and, turning on his heel, without ceremony he walked to the door.

'Wait,' said Foscani. 'I did not give you leave to withdraw.'

'I have no more to say,' Savarin answered bitterly.

'No, but it is possible I have. Um!' Foscani's tone had become dangerously smooth again. 'Sit down. This is Mr. Nicholasse Cheyne of England. He, too, is interested in conditions.'

'Then he should visit Plevi,' said Savarin. 'He would doubtless be much enlightened.'

'Thank you, Major Savarin,' said Nikko. 'I shall take you at your word. The Liberator has given me an exoneration pass and I am free to go where I like.'

There was a touch of challenge in his tone, and, as he said the words, he sought Foscani's eyes as though daring him to deny him the right. But Foscani only smiled.

'When you please,' said he. 'It will be a novel experience to see a royal prince engaged in the humble task of quarrying salt. By the way, Savarin, how is His Royal Highness?'

'He is alive,' was the laconic rejoinder.

'Well, come,' said Foscani, 'if an old man, accustomed to luxury, can exist in those conditions, it would argue that your complaint was almost frivolous.'

'King Carelon is alive by virtue of the loyalty of men who were once his subjects.'

'I did not know it was possible to exist upon loyalty,' said Foscani.

'He is alive because those men daily save a scrap from their rations to add to his.'

At these words, something gave a leap in Nikko's

heart and he bit his tongue to prevent a sudden impulse to cry out, 'Well done.'

Foscani leant back in his chair and looked at Savarin with a coldly analytic stare.

'A very pretty symbol,' he said, and nodded. 'Royalty at its old game of bleeding its subjects white.'

Savarin, with clenched hands, sprang to his feet.

'Before God, and in the name of Liberty,' he cried, 'let us be just! The King may have, and doubtless has, offended against our code, but if he were to know what I have just told to you he would die of shame.'

'So he is unaware of the source of his supplies — um?'

'That I'll swear.'

'Ah.' Foscani put his finger-tips together. 'Perhaps you, too, Savarin, contribute a daily delicacy to the royal table. Yes, hum!'

'It is against the regulations for any warder or officer to give food to prisoners,' Savarin replied stubbornly.

'Just so, and fresh regulations will be issued to prevent prisoners giving their food to favourites. It is necessary that each man should have and consume his full ration. No wonder the death roll is high with that kind of thing going on! Good-day, Savarin. You will explain to King Carelon the exact reason why his supplies have so suddenly diminished. No, on second thoughts, I will do that myself, when next week or the week after I visit Plevi.'

A sudden hope burned in Savarin's eyes.

'You are coming to Plevi?'

'Yes — not necessarily to alter the conditions — but perhaps to effect changes of another kind. Once more, good-day.'

Savarin walked out without a word.

Foscani turned with a smile to Nikko:

'A character, eh. Quite a character. What was your estimate of him?'

'I think,' said Nikko, very slowly, 'he is hardly the man for his job.'

'A fool, eh?'

'Perhaps, or perhaps rather too humane.'

Foscani held up his hands in dismay.

'Humane! It is incredible, Cheyne, that you should be so deceived. Where is the humanity that stands by inactive while ten men perish each day that one should live? Reason, Cheyne, where is your reason?'

'If that one man were yourself, you would not complain,' said Nikko.

Foscani waved him aside.

'I must look for someone to take Savarin's place. As you say, he is a misfit. Come, I can hear the horses. This afternoon I shall show you five thousand men who fit their jobs as closely as a silk glove fits the hand.'

II

SURROUNDED by a mounted escort of six civil guards, Foscani and Nikko rode out of Djevo by the road which ran beside the gorge. The upper end of the town was built on a wedge-shaped plateau, which swiftly narrowed into a valley, through which the river flowed. As the ground rose, the steep cliffs of the gorge diminished until river and road were nearly at the same level. For half a mile the valley ran between smooth downs of sward, but at a bend the character of the scenery underwent a sudden change, the grassy slopes becoming huge precipices of grey limestone rearing up a thousand feet on either side of a dark and echoing ravine. The road became appreciably steeper and wound in and out of the ravine like a great white snake.

Carried on brackets which pierced the rock face and just above reach of the hand ran a score or more of telegraph and telephone wires, whose china insulators of various colours looked strangely out of character with the roughness of the scene.

It was Foscani who drew Nikko's attention to them.

'You observe, Cheyne, each pair of wires have insulators of a different colour. A freakish fancy of my own. Each colour carries a private line from various departments to army headquarters.'

'Any advantage?' Nikko enquired.

'There is no particular advantage except that one can tap in with a field instrument at any point. Colours have always pleased me, Cheyne. In some respects I have a childish simplicity.'

Foscani's obsession for revealing fresh side-lights on his character was unappeasable.

Nikko did not feel impelled to investigate the variants of anyone's childish simplicity at that moment. He was cursing his luck at being involved in this expedition when his whole mind was concentrated on the thought of getting in touch with Savarin. In allowing him to be present at that interview, the Fates had thrown him a card which, properly played, might very well serve to bring about the release of Bettany's father.

Nikko was confident that, granted an opportunity to get in touch with Savarin while still smarting under the lash of Foscani's tongue, it would need but little encouragement to persuade him to an act in favour of the Royalist party.

The Governor of Plevi salt pits had revealed himself as a man with a conscience, and had further revealed that dangerous kind of obstinacy which, if properly encouraged, might be used to advantage. That he feared

Foscani was plain, but, as was witnessed by swift outbursts of temper and resentment, his fear was not so great as to deprive him of a certain moral courage and determination.

With this weapon in his hand, it was intolerable to be riding up the gorge with Foscani while the man of all others with whom he wished to be was, in all likelihood, riding hard in the opposite direction.

'You are very silent,' said Foscani.

'I was wondering,' Nikko replied, with no pretence of grace, 'where the devil we are going and why?'

Foscani did not answer at once, but he looked at Nikko with an expression of displeasure.

'Cheyne,' he said, 'you are disposed at times to be a shade too brusque for my liking.'

Nikko said nothing, and the other proceeded in a warning note.

'In your own interests bear that fact in mind, for I should be sorry if the esteem I have for you underwent a change.'

This was clearly no time to sacrifice what little popularity he had gained, so Nikko made a rueful face and laughed.

'I can imagine your sorrow would be nothing compared with mine,' said he.

The reply, with its hint of power on one side and weakness on the other, was flattering to Foscani's conceit.

'Explain yourself,' he insisted. 'Whenever we are together you provide me with conflicting impressions. What is the emotion that excites you, as it were, to snap your fingers in my face? There is something about me that you resent — yes?'

'Why deny it?' said Nikko. 'There is much about you that I resent.'

'Would not envy more truly express your feelings?' Foscani suggested. 'I think it would. I have watched you closely, and whenever by this or that I dropped a word to show the power I control, you have always reacted in the same manner. A tightening of the muscles — a sudden colour — and what from any other man I should call an impertinent retort. You have a natural antagonism for power — or should I say jealousy?'

The keen observation revealed in this statement was far from agreeable to Nikko.

'I must be a poor hand at hiding my feelings,' he said, 'or you are even more astute than I had imagined. But you are right. I do resent you — as any man with ambitions is bound to do.'

Foscani laughed lightly.

'How rare and how delightful is honesty!' he said. 'So you, too, are ambitious, Cheyne? You, too, would like to be in a position to say this or that and know that it would be so?'

'Yes,' said Nikko. 'To face big odds and beat them.'

'And you believe it is in you to do that?'

'I should not be afraid to try.'

'No.' Foscani stroked his chin with a white-gloved hand. 'You would always try — of that I am convinced; but I am further convinced that you would not succeed.'

'You should wait for the proof to be convinced of that,' Nikko answered, with a frown.

Foscani shook his head.

'The proof is in yourself,' he said. 'In these very feelings you find it so hard to conceal, Cheyne.'

'I don't understand.'

'The reason that I have succeeded, is because I have

no feelings — none whatever. The reason that you will fail is because you have too many.'

Nikko started and opened his mouth, but Foscani went on:

'Leaders are men who do not represent a cause, but who walk ahead of it — alone — as I have done. You would never do that. With you, the cause, the idea, would always predominate to the exclusion of self and against the realisation of your own ambitions.'

For a while Nikko rode in silence. When at last he looked up, there was an expression almost of liking in his eyes.

'You're a queer card, Foscani,' he said, 'a queer card. But you seem to understand.'

'Infallibly,' said Foscani. Then, 'Look.'

They had rounded a bend in the ravine, and before them, as though they had passed through a door, the landscape suddenly widened into a great basin in the mountains, dotted all over with regular lines of artillery, horses, transport wagons, and bell tents.

12

THE fertile oasis or *polji* of Issoi, since the revolution, had become the permanent camp of Foscani's Rifles. Here, in security from attack or interference, this body of mercenaries, scourings from the Near East, brigands from Albania, criminals who had fled from justice, and deserters from a dozen European armies, had their being and the enjoyment of luxuries, long since unknown to the civilian population of Sciriel. Every so often their services were required to spread terror in certain districts. In this business they revealed a bloodthirsty eagerness and efficiency that crowned their endeavours with unfailing success.

That Foscani had contrived to preserve any kind of

order among this savage degenerate company of Azerbaijans, Roumelians, Turks, Tcherkasses, scourings from Constantinople, and hired murderers from a dozen lands was not the least remarkable of his achievements. His methods were conciliatory compared with those employed in ruling the civil population.

The men were given plenty to eat — too much to drink — and were not denied the society of women. Their blood was kept at a nice even temperature by providing them with plenty of killing to do and no restrictions as to the manner in which it should be done. Except when engaged upon punitive operations, they were given practically no duties, nor was there any discipline worthy of the name.

If they cared to fight among themselves, they were at liberty, and were even encouraged, to do so.

The only restrictions placed upon their freedom of action, was a forbiddance to leave the *polji* of Issoi. In the carrying out of this order, Nature had rendered valuable assistance. Save through the Djevo Pass, there was no way out. On either side of the *polji* were immense unscalable precipices, while across its eastern extremity, stretched like a bulwark the dam of Sarsanova, holding poised against its concrete sides three square miles of water. Beyond and encircling this great reservoir, the mountains bunched and loomed hugely, piercing the clouds with spires of glittering snow. In that direction a few intrepid climbers might have made good their escape — but the chances were unfavourable. The only other exit was by way of the swallow-hole of Issoi, which lay at the end of a blind, precipitous gorge to the left of the Djevo Pass. It was through this black, gaping hole in the rock face that the divided waters, overflowing from the reservoir, or racing through the great sluices that once had supplied

the power station with its source of energy, plunged into the bowels of the earth. But although a number of dead men had saved their comrades the trouble of burial by taking this route, by general consent no living man had found his curiosity strong enough to encourage him to do likewise.

Thus, to those in search of freedom there remained only the Djevo Pass, which was controlled by two machine-guns emplaced high up in the cliffs and commanded by a small section of gunners whose interests were inimical to those of Foscani's Rifles — and whose orders were specific to shoot down any man or body of men for whose right to leave authority had not been issued by telephone from the D.S.N.

One way and another, since among a force of five thousand it is impossible to eliminate malcontents, the machine-gunners did not find life too tedious and were afforded plentiful opportunity to practise their skill. By night their range of fire was illumined with searchlights, by whose aid, when the need arose, they made excellent practice.

In the days before the war and the subsequent revolution, besides the power house there had been a farm at Issoi where rich crops were raised and a vineyard which produced good wine, but now all signs of cultivation had been trampled into the earth beneath the feet of Foscani's Rifles and under the wheels of his transport and artillery. Instead, there stretched a barren arena of dust upon which, save by the riverbanks, neither grass nor flowers grew. It was a place where Nature had been atrophied. Even the trees had been felled for firewood. Wherever the eye rested it was the same. Tents and more tents — men and more men. The only relief to the absolute monotony of the scene was the grey stone-built power house and the old

farmstead which now did service as headquarters of the force and billets for the generalissimo and his officers.

As Nikko, Foscani, and their escort came into view, a drum started to beat and half a dozen bugles blared out the fall-in. It was the custom to offer to the Liberator some kind of military honours, and from all directions men came running to muster on the parade ground and form into companies. There was nothing square or orderly in their formation, nor was any attempt made to size the men or dress them or present them in any kind of standard uniform. They wore what they liked, fell in where they liked, and stood how they liked. When they did not like standing, they sat down.

All of this Nikko observed from a distance of half a mile. Accustomed as he had been in the Legion to a discipline of iron fixity, it was all that he could do to prevent himself from laughing outright.

It was not until he had ridden up to the camp and seen at close range some of the men who lounged by their tents or stretched themselves in the sun that his opinion underwent a change.

In the Foreign Legion he had met plenty of hard cases, but those men would have assumed the innocence of babes beside the rank and file of Foscani's Rifles.

Their faces were open books scrawled over with a record of deeds as well undone. Everywhere, mean, narrow eyes, heavy jowls, thick lips. Faces composed from what must have been a refuse heap of human features. Shameless, lustful faces, distorted by greed, envy, and unspeakable laughter. Faces sodden and slipped from overindulgence.

Never in his life had Nikko entered a company so utterly vile.

'Well, Cheyne, and what is your opinion of my nursery — eh?' queried Foscani. 'Does it help you to understand how I am able to get things done?'

'The only thing I can't understand,' he answered grimly, 'is why you haven't shot every man-jack of them.'

Foscani laughed.

'It would be foolish to do so while they are still useful. But between ourselves, Cheyne, when they have ceased to be useful, it is a problem that may call for serious consideration.'

'If you want any help ——' said Nikko, and broke off short at the sight of a group of girls and women who simpered and tittered or looked afraid, at the opening of a great marquee.

Nikko pointed angrily.

'How does that come about?' he demanded.

Foscani smiled and waved a hand to the girls.

'In some cases voluntarily,' he replied, 'in other cases under compulsion. In the rush of dealing with a great number of counter-revolutionaries, we had to adopt wholesale methods. The men were sent to Plevi — the women to make themselves useful in other spheres.'

For a full minute Nikko was silent, while the blood surged to his temples and hammered through his pulses. A consuming desire to take Foscani by the throat and squeeze those folds of white smooth flesh until his fingers met drove all other considerations from his mind. That he was not mastered by that desire was due to Foscani himself and the words Foscani had spoken in the gorge.

To succeed, a man must have no feelings. And that was true. No feelings — but only an object — and that object was to convey Bettany and her father safely over

the frontier. It did not matter how greatly the world might benefit by the extinction of Foscani. It did not matter what rapture he, Nicholas Cheyne, might deny himself in failing to be the instrument that brought about that extinction. His task awaited him — a task in whose fulfilment there was no place for private vengeance or emotion.

Nikko marvelled that he was able to force a laugh through his close-shut teeth.

'Small wonder,' he said, 'there is that collection of weapons on the walls of your room.'

But Foscani did not hear, for as they approached headquarters the track was grouped and crowded with curious onlookers, anxious for a glance at the Liberator. One fellow, bolder than the rest, made a trumpet of his hands and bawled:

'Ho, father! Give us work!'

The cry was taken up by a hundred throats. 'Give us work to do!'

'We are sick of dust and women; give us work!'

'Has the world turned soft that we have no work, father?'

A great loose-limbed Turk danced in the roadway, brandishing a knife and showing the manner in which he fain would use it.

One of Foscani's escort struck him across the mouth with the flat of a sabre. Onlookers shrieked approval, but the cry was taken up again and ran from mouth to mouth.

'Work — work — we want work! Men's work!'

The companies assembled on the parade ground caught the burden of the cry, tossing it to and fro among their waving ranks until the greater voices beat down the lesser and put order and rhythm to the slogan.

'Work — work — give us work!'

They stamped their feet to mark the time. Five thousand voices roaring — and the rocks and crags and distant mountains ringing back echoes to swell that mighty chorus.

Foscani rode up to headquarters and dismounted beside the waiting generalissimo and his officers.

'Work — work — give us work!'

Foscani turned to his Rifles and held up both his hands. Slowly the uproar diminished and died away until at last even the echoes were silent.

Foscani's face was one great smile.

'Assuredly I will!' he said in a voice that travelled far over the heads of those who listened.

The men broke ranks and taking hands danced among themselves.

13

THIS was the first time Nikko was privileged to see Foscani in his public capacity or judge of his powers as an orator.

For ten minutes he spoke to the men, with great pauses between his sentences to allow of his words being repeated to those ranks who were beyond earshot.

What actually he said might well have been the utterance of a man whose every thought and aim was directed toward justice and the inspiration of patriotism in its loftiest aspect. He spoke of the distress he felt that there were still in Sciriel men, and women too, so lost to all sense of human obligation as to cling to the fetters of an outworn system designed to rob their fellow creatures of the blessings of freedom.

'Villainy dies hard, my children,' he said, 'and it becomes our painful duty on that account to expedite its decease.'

It was one of those shafts of satire for which Foscani was famous and his audience had waited. They yelled encouragement and brandished their arms.

'At Plesna,' he began — and the name brought about a fresh burst of shouts and whistles — 'at Plesna there are gathered together, in the sight of Satan, men for whose souls he must be eagerly waiting and banking up his fires. To you — at the appointed time — will fall the task of giving the devil his due.'

Again the shrieks of demoniac laughter swept the ranks as wind sweeps across a cornfield.

'Knowing as I do the spirit of patriotism that has inspired your efforts in the past, I do not fear that you will shrink from the repugnant duties that now await you. Life, my children, is a beautiful and a sacred thing when it is lived beautifully. But when life is used to forge chains to hamper the freedom of men's lives, life ceases to be beautiful and is no longer sacred. I have searched my heart and my brain to find even a slight excuse for the traitors at Plesna and I have found none. Therefore I say they are better dead.'

Such a burst of fanatical cheering greeted the conclusion of his speech as even in that fierce company had not before been heard.

'One final word,' cried Foscani, and they broke off to listen. 'It is a hard task for any man to convince an entire nation of the rightness of his cause. Here and there are blunted understandings who still look askance at the red and black colours of the revolution. It is our duty to carry conviction wheresoever we travel. I shall give orders, therefore, for the citizens of Djevo and of the other towns through which you will pass on your march to Plesna to line the streets and give good and loyal proof of their faith in you. If by chance, as may happen, you see among the crowds faces that do

not bear the stamp of enthusiasm, it will rest with you to teach their owners better manners.'

'And we will, father, never fear!' cried a voice.

Foscani drew himself up.

'I want this, which may perhaps be the last and most important expedition you will be called upon to make, to live long in Scirien memories. So that in the time to come men will still speak in hushed voices of how Foscani's Rifles came to Djevo on the march that led to freedom.'

When the cheering died away, he turned with a smile to the generalissimo and said:

'If the weather holds and there is no rain, the marsh should bear in about three weeks.'

The generalissimo, a man of huge build, whose single eye glittered like a polished stone in a face the colour of copper, nodded and gave his moustache a quick brush upward with the back of his hand.

'Sooner the better,' said he. 'The men are straining at the leash. Hard to hold, overfed, and with the spring in their veins they are ripe for a killing.'

'Then keep your eye upon the barometer, Bouvard, and the steel bright.'

He turned to follow the generalissimo into the shade of the farmhouse, where a pretty girl with a slack mouth was busy putting out bottles and glasses.

Nikko was forgotten and was glad of it. Filling and lighting his pipe, he wandered away in the direction of the dam. The heat in this breathless mountain pit was overpowering and the water drew him irresistibly. Apparently, its appeal was more easily resisted by the men of Foscani's Rifles, for there was not a soul at or near the dam. Like a great grey wall a quarter of a mile in length, it stretched in an unbroken line from one side of the *polji* to the other. It was a magnificent

piece of engineering construction, rising at an acute angle to a height of seventy-five feet from the ground level. Nikko raced at the steep sides of the ramp, clutching with bare hands at the rough surface, but even so he did not succeed in reaching the top until his third endeavour. The top was flat for a width of five feet, then sloped again into water of the purest emerald. Stripping off his clothes, Nikko plunged in. The water was icy cold and did not encourage him to stay in overlong. But before scrambling back to the dam, to test the depth, he let himself sink. In this he was unsuccessful, and his feet failed to find the bottom, but down there was a curious and unpleasant sensation of drag and suction which offered a positive resistance when he sought to rise to the surface. It was not enough to prevent his rising, but it was more than enough to discourage any further aquatic exploration. He came up at a point over thirty yards nearer the sluices than where he had left his clothes. On the whole, the bathe was not the success he had anticipated, and Nikko reflected that other reasons besides a natural uncleanliness might account for the lack of patronage offered to the lake by Foscani's mercenaries. The sun swiftly did service for the towel he did not possess, and having dressed again Nikko walked along the top of the dam to the sluices. There were fifteen sluices ranged in a row, double-drop water gates, operated by heavy geared hoists, inset into narrow arches through which the water flowed over slanting aprons into a concrete basin, whence huge pipes carried it to the turbines of the power house below. Only five of the sluices were opened, and that but partially; enough, he supposed, to carry off the surplus waters from the lake and prevent it lipping over the crest of the dam.

Nikko strolled back to the spot at which he had

mounted, since from there he could see the front of the farm and note whether preparations were being made for Foscani's return.

Across the open space a man was approaching carrying a fishing-rod. For want of better occupation, Nikko waited to watch the sport and perhaps take a hand in it. The man came nearer, whistling and singing to himself, and stopped twenty yards away, looking about him as if to find a place to climb up.

'Throw up your rod,' Nikko called, and 'I'll give you a hand.'

'If you'd give me silence,' the man retorted, 'I'd like it better. What chance of sport has a man with a scarecrow flapping his arms against the skyline?'

But even as he spoke, he became suddenly rigid like a pointer. There was a light whir of wings, a martin settled for an instant on the side of the dam, and as if by magic vanished.

In a flash the man was scrambling up the ramp and had inserted the point of what Nikko had mistaken for a fishing-rod into the hole down which the bird had disappeared.

Mystified, Nikko watched and saw the rod enter ten good feet into the concrete itself. Then the man who performed this curious feat gave the butt a light, swift lunge and proceeded to withdraw it. At the end of the rod, impaled upon a barb, was the dead body of the bird. The man dropped the bird into his basket and, licking his lips, looked up with a grin.

'Martins are very good,' he said, 'though not many men know it — very good they are. It was I alone who thought of this way of catching them.'

Once again that day, the longing to kill by violence surged through Nikko's brain and once again he had to remind himself that he was reserved for other service.

A fight in that place would surely result in hundreds rushing to join in, when his chances would amount to nothing. But it was with the greatest reluctance he turned, sickened, from the man and his loathly sport and slithered down the side of the dam at a point fifty yards farther on. Here also, at regular intervals, little holes had been drilled into the concrete apparently for the purpose of draining moisture from the core of the mighty bulk of masonry. At numbers of these martins were appearing and disappearing.

The inventor of the barbed rod would not lack for game, and even as Nikko glanced over his shoulder he saw that the rod was starting on its second journey.

Nikko turned his back on the dam and retraced his steps toward the farmhouse. On a larger scale the *polji* of Issoi was like any of those small black holes into which, when Foscani had no further use for his Rifles, irresistible death might intrude its point. Machine-guns at the mouth of the pass — a day's work at the outside — machine-guns or ——

Nikko Cheyne stopped short as an idea blazed up in his brain. With a sudden movement, he spun round, stared at the dam, walked back a dozen paces, checked and turned again.

'No!' he cried out loud. 'No! Bettany — that's my job — Bettany — to ensure her freedom, nothing else.'

He was quivering from head to foot and put out a hand to steady himself against a telegraph pole.

Slowly, his thoughts became normal. Why a telegraph pole, here beyond headquarters? He looked up. The double lines borne on a series of poles and travelling through yellow insulators ran up almost to the dam itself. Here they hung in limp spirals from the last pole, at a spot where the ground gave evidence that some kind of hutments once had stood. A dead line, no

longer in use, but there had been yellow insulators all the way from Djevo and through the pass.

For a considerable time Nikko stood with knitted brows, looking at the wires and rapping his teeth with a finger-nail.

The man with the rod, thinking he had an appreciative audience, shouted over his shoulder:

'Four, comrade, the fourth. I'll have a dozen before I'm done.'

Nikko Cheyne thrust his hands into his pockets and walked to the farm. A sentry at the door, knowing in whose company he had arrived, stood aside to let him pass.

Foscani was sipping a glass of his favourite Slivovica, and with his free hand was twisting a tress of the girl's hair, she being on the floor at his feet.

'Ah, Cheyne,' he said. 'Have you been making friends with my children? Interesting material are they not?'

'I have been bathing,' Nikko replied.

Foscani's eyebrows soared up.

'Bathing! in the Sarsanova. It is a wonder you were not drowned.'

'Should you have regretted it if I had been drowned?' Nikko demanded.

'No,' said Foscani.

'Then perhaps you are sorry I was not?'

'It makes no difference to me one way or the other.'

'One never knows,' said Nikko Cheyne.

Foscani slapped and kissed the fat, idle face of the girl and rose to his feet.

'Come, let us go back,' he said.

Across the *polji* of Issoi and up to the mouth of the pass, they were followed by a cheering, dancing horde.

As they entered the pass, the machine-guns on the heights tap-tapped a warning to discourage the over-zealous and bid them to keep within bounds.

As they rode down the pass, Nikko's eyes were drawn irresistibly to ever-recurring pairs of bright yellow insulators bracketed into the face of the rock. They held his attention to the exclusion of all else.

14

At the headquarters of the D.S.N., Foscani plunged into an accumulation of neglected work, thus providing Nikko with an opportunity of slipping away unnoticed.

'To-morrow,' he had said to Foscani, 'we will have another shot at the drawing.'

But Foscani had replied:

'To-morrow we will not.'

This was good news, since Nikko foresaw that on the morrow he would be on the road to Plevi in pursuit of Savarin.

In one of the anterooms as he was passing out, he met the little rat-like man who had introduced Savarin earlier in the day.

'Hey,' said Nikko, 'that was an odd case you brought in this morning, Simon.'

The rat-like man puckered his face sourly.

'The Governor of Plevi?'

Nikko nodded, and Simon asked a question with his hands.

'But for how long, comrade? The Liberator has little fondness for those who come yapping with complaints.'

'Who has?' Nikko returned — then, 'I suppose Savarin has ridden back to Plevi.'

Simon grinned and touched his nose.

'Unless the attractions of the little piece at the Villa Fresnoy have proved too strong a lure.'

Under his breath Nikko repeated Villa Fresnoy. Aloud he said:

'Is that how the wind blows?'

'You should see Plevi to understand.'

'One day I may do so. A good night, Simon.'

'A good night.'

Nikko walked swiftly across the palace yard and, following quiet and unfrequented by-ways, came at last to one of the many entrances to The House of Friends.

At that comparatively early hour the cellars were all but deserted and the first man Nikko met was old Mekla.

'I did not know ——' Nikko began.

'That I was a Friend,' Mekla cut in. 'Indeed I am, although, since old nerves are none too strong, I am seldom present at the meetings. I came in the hope of finding you. There is a message.'

Nikko held out a hand.

'It is a spoken message — from Jean Festubert and is about the horses. He said you would understand.'

'Yes.'

'You are to meet outside the city wall at half after midnight. The exact spot ——' and he reeled off some minute instructions.

Nikko nodded impatiently.

'To-night I have something of the greatest importance to do.'

'Jean declared this was of great importance.'

'But it comes second,' said Nikko. 'Will you see Jean again?'

'Yes, or his brother.'

'Then say I will join them — if I can — but they must not wait for me.'

'I will give the message.'

'Mekla, where is the Villa Fresnoy?'

Mekla wrinkled his brow.

'Fresnoy — Fresnoy. Ah, that is by the Elysées Gardens. A villa adjoining or near to the house where the Princess is held prisoner.'

Nikko started.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Yes, I am sure. The Villa Fresnoy is owned by a Madam Roubet — who, if rumour may be trusted, is the mistress of Savarin, Governor of the pits at Plevi.'

Nikko looked out through a narrow grating piercing the side of the gorge and saw that dusk was already gathering.

With a nod of farewell, he mounted the stone steps and, after pausing a moment in the porch to assure himself that the street was empty, he darted away in the direction of the bridge and the gardens beyond.

A fortnight had passed since his meeting with Bettany and he ached for the touch of her hand and the sound of her voice. In common prudence he had schooled himself to keep away from her and not to imperil the success of the enterprise by risking a second climb to the roof; but, as he approached the house and saw the lights glimmering behind the lowered blinds of her room, he was possessed by a yearning almost beyond control.

Only by repeating over and over again, 'We've all the future — all the future,' was he able to master the impulse.

The curfew had not yet been rung and he was still at liberty to be abroad.

Waiting until the sentry was at the end of his beat, Nikko crossed the road to the railings on the far side.

There was still light enough to read the names of the houses and he had no difficulty in finding the Villa Fresnoy; a little white chalet of a place with a square of garden before it and marble steps to the front door.

Nikko crossed the garden, mounted the steps, and, following the custom which by order prevailed in Djevo, turned the handle of the front door and walked inside without knocking. In the hall he stood and listened, then, after closing the door, rapped with his knuckles on the top of a console table.

Somewhere a voice exclaimed:

'But I am sure, *chérie!*'

Then a door at the head of a short flight of stairs was thrown open and a woman with a mass of crisp brown curls framing a small oval face appeared in the opening.

'Who are you?' she said, with fingers that twined nervously in a string of beads at her throat. 'Who — why are you here?'

'I regret having startled you, Madam,' said Nikko, bowing formally, 'but I have an important message for the Commandant Savarin.'

The woman hesitated.

'He — he is not here.'

'Madam ——' Nikko began, but had no need to go on, for Savarin himself, a napkin in his hand, appeared in the doorway at the back of the woman.

'Marching orders, doubtless,' he exclaimed bitterly. 'There is no point, Elice, in pretending ——' Then, recognising Nikko, he broke off abruptly: 'You — the Englishman! I thought — but perhaps even so I was right.'

'Major Savarin,' said Nikko quietly, 'may I have a word with you in private?'

'If it is to say that the State has no further use for my services, speak from where you are.'

'I am not a spokesman for the State,' said Nikko, 'even though by accident I may have some knowledge of its intentions.'

Savarin lowered his bushy brows and nibbled an end of his moustache.

'Your room, Elice,' he queried; 'we could be alone in your room?'

She nodded swiftly.

'Yes, the shutters are across and I will stay in the hall in case anyone comes.'

'You are very kind, Madam,' said Nikko, and something in his voice made an appeal to her.

'It is not anything very bad you have to tell, Monsieur?'

'That will depend upon how one looks at it, Madam.'

She touched Nikko's arm.

'You,' she said, 'are not of the kind to bring bad news. And — and I love him dearly, Monsieur.'

'In here,' said Savarin and pushed open a door.

Nikko waited until by sound he knew the woman had reached the hall, then he squared his shoulders and with a touch of triumph began to speak.

'When Foscani comes to Plevi, you will be relieved of your governorship.'

'It may be so.'

'It will be so.' Nikko spoke with emphasis.

'And you, Monsieur, are here to extract what amusement you can from my discomfort, eh? Let me say that, as a foreigner, that attitude is unbecoming. And let me say further that the day I leave Plevi I shall thank God. It may interest you to convey that piece of news to your — your patron.'

Nikko flushed a deep red.

'You misread my motives,' he answered. 'If there was enthusiasm in the way I spoke, it was because I was glad that a good man is to relinquish a post for which he could have no other feeling than hatred.'

'A good man,' Savarin repeated. 'That is not Foscani's opinion of me.'

'Foscani's opinions are not mine,' said Nikko.

Savarin gave a short laugh.

'But if you value life,' he said, 'you will adopt them.'

'Was that your policy this morning?' Nikko countered. 'I thought otherwise.'

Savarin bit his moustache.

'I am a fool,' he said. 'My temper — what I feel — at the moment — robs me of judgment. It remains now to pay the price of folly.'

'To leave Plevi is not a big price.'

Savarin tossed up a hand.

'Are you so ignorant of our ways, young Englishman? To fail to satisfy the State is to become an enemy of the State. And enemies of the State do not live long in Sciriel.'

'Sciriel is not the only country in Europe.'

'But it is my country.'

'Would it not be truer to say it was your country — but is now nothing?'

Savarin took a pace forward and peered into Nikko's eyes.

'Where does this talk lead?' he demanded.

'It is for you to decide.'

Savarin pointed to a chair and drew up another for himself.

'I thought,' he said doubtfully, 'you were a friend of the State.'

'Do you think so still?'

'I am wondering.'

A silence fell between them. Stretching out an arm, Nikko picked up a massive silver candlestick and put it in Savarin's hand.

'Let us clear up the mystery,' said he. 'I am an enemy of the State, although in a way you will never understand, it has been a better friend to me than man ever possessed. Yet, I am its enemy. Are you, Savarin, its friend?'

Savarin looked at the heavy candlestick and then at Nikko.

'Why have you put this in my hand?'

'So that, if you are indeed a friend of the State as it is now, you may have the satisfaction of knocking out my brains, as the brains of a traitor should be knocked out.'

The older man leant back in his chair and stared.

'If you fail in that duty, Savarin, you are not the kind of patriot revolution breeds.'

For a space Savarin said nothing, then he set the candlestick down on the table with a clatter.

'I hate the revolution from the bottom of my soul!' he cried. 'I hate it as a cancer! God knows how ever I persuaded myself to hold another view.'

'That being so, you and I can talk,' said Nikko.

During the hour that followed the two men's voices were scarcely raised above a whisper.

Savarin's face had coloured and then whitened when Nikko spoke of King Carelon and the part he would be called upon to play in aiding the King to escape, but as the plan was developed and it was made clear that he too was to be of the party who would attempt to cross the frontier, anxiety gave place to interest and interest to enthusiasm.

'It might be done,' said he; 'at least it is not impossible. The risk is very great, but — but the King himself. Would he be willing to leave Sciriel knowing that his daughter is still in the country? He is a proud man.'

'You will tell the King that his daughter will be waiting for him by the hut of the leech-gatherer.'

'Name of a name, is this true?'

Nikko nodded.

'There are four men ready to give their lives that it may be made true.'

'Then here is another,' said Savarin, and held out a hand to seal the promise. 'I shall be back in Plevi by midday to-morrow. On the third night we might make the attempt.'

'The third?'

'Not before. There will be plenty to do. Even a Governor cannot walk through prison gates with one of his charges without exciting suspicion. Besides, you will have to bring up the horses the night before and lie concealed throughout the day. If you were seen approaching Plevi in the daylight, questions would be asked.'

'I had thought of that,' said Nikko, 'but is there a place where horses can be hidden?'

Savarin scraped his chin with his finger-nails, then, crossing to the writing-table, he picked up a scrap of paper and drew a rough sketch.

'Yes, at this point. An old byre built on a slope of grass between one of the quarries and the edge of the Svorzo Forest. See, here is the prison, this dot — the byre is three hundred yards to the west. Even in the dark you cannot mistake the place, since you have but to turn sharply to the right where the road comes out of the trees.'

'I shall not be challenged on the road?'

Savarin shook his head.

'At that hour, no. A few *permissionnaires*, warders granted leave of absence to get drunk at the nearest village, pass that way. But I shall issue an order cancelling all leave.'

'Good. The Princess and her escort should be at the leech-gatherer's hut before dawn; with fifteen miles to ride, we should be ready to start at 1 A.M.'

'At one with the help of God, I will bring King Carelon to the byre.'

That there should be no loophole for failure, they talked over the scheme from every angle until they had agreed upon its most minute details.

Then Nikko rose, faced with perhaps the most difficult problem of all.

'Major Savarin,' he said, 'there is a fund — a large fund — upon which, after you have left Sciriel, it will be your right to draw up to any amount.'

In an instant Savarin was all points — bristling.

'Monsieur, I have offered to give you my aid — not to sell it.'

'There is no question of that,' said Nikko gently, 'but here in Sciriel all property has been confiscated by the State. In leaving, you leave with nothing. To meet with that eventuality, this fund has been raised. It is a cheerless thing for a man to enter a foreign country penniless.'

'A man can work.'

'But until he has found work, the fund is there to be drawn upon.'

Savarin continued to scowl.

'In the last year,' said he, 'I have done things that poverty and shortage and what is before us may help me to expiate. I am not in search of ease, Monsieur.'

He paused and rubbed his chin and his expression changed. 'But — but if Madam — whom you met here to-night — if she — Elice ——'

'The fund is there, Monsieur, at the service of its friends.'

There was another pause.

'I will remember,' said Savarin.

Nikko looked at his watch.

'With your permission,' said he, 'I will leave by way of the garden. The curfew has sounded and I do not wish to excite the notice of the guard, for my work to-night has only just begun.'

There were two windows to the room, a front and a back. Pushing open the latter, Nikko swung his legs over the sill.

'Good-night, Major Savarin.'

'Good fortune,' the soldier replied.

For several minutes after Nikko had vanished into the dark, Savarin stood with brows contracted, biting his moustache.

'I may have been a fool,' he said to himself, 'but I thank God for it.'

At a sound from the street — the faint whir of a motor and the clop-clop of horses' hoofs — he raised his head. Elice burst into the room — her eyes bright with terror.

'Foscani!' she gasped. 'Foscani! He is coming here!'

Savarin's arm circled her shoulders and held her tight. His free hand dropped to the hilt of his sabre. Breathless — unmoving — they waited. The sound came nearer, nearer.

Elice gave a smothered cry.

'They are stopping — stopping before the house.'

'Which means that I do not go back to Plevi.'

Rigid and silent they waited. Seconds passed. Then from outside rang out a challenge.

'The streets are shut. Who goes?'

And the reply.

'It is the Liberator — to see the woman Montressor.'

Followed a clatter of hoofs and the thump of a rifle butt on the paving-stones. A voice cried:

'Guard — turn out the guard.'

Releasing his hold upon Elice, Savarin moved to the window and parting the shutters peered out.

Forty yards down the street before Bettany's house was Foscani's car, its headlights playing upon the legs of his escort's horses. As the front door of the house opened and the guard poured out, fresh light streamed from the hall upon the black figure of Foscani mounting the steps.

Savarin turned with a sigh of relief.

'The danger has passed,' he said, and added, 'Our danger.'

'Poor little Princess,' said the woman slowly.

15

In the hall of Bettany's house, the Liberator of Sciriel thus addressed the officer of the guard:

'You will say that I, Foscani, am here. If the lady refuses to see me, you will say the State does not acknowledge her right to refuse anything. If she has already retired, you will order her to get up and dress again. If the old man Vilasto is with her, you will send him to bed. I shall not require my body-guard to mount above the first floor. And, as a last instruction, you will remove that smile from your face, since not only do I find it offensive, but it was not my intention to be humorous. Now go.'

The officer went and until his return Foscani played with a pair of white gloves and looked at various members of the guard in a manner so discomforting as to provide them with sensations of nakedness and of shame.

Said the officer: 'She is waiting.'

Foscani went upstairs without a word, his bodyguard following and taking up positions on the first floor.

There were four flights of stairs to the apartments of Princess Natalie Melliora Maria Elizabeta, heir presumptive to the throne of Sciriel, and the last two were steep. On the top landing Foscani, being a shade out of condition, paused for breath before passing along the passage to the door of her room.

This he opened unceremoniously.

She was alone, seated at her writing-table, digging the point of a pencil into a sheet of blotting-paper. She did not look up at Foscani's entrance. When news of his arrival had been announced, a cold paralysis deadened her brain and limbs, but with his entry composure returned. She did not feel the least afraid, but the nearness of the man inspired in her a sense of repugnance as for a reptile or an unclean insect.

'Madam,' said he smoothly, 'as it is not a royal custom to rise and greet a guest, may I be permitted to kneel and kiss your hand?'

Bettany prayed that her voice might be steady — and it was.

'You should have little difficulty in finding a better reason for going upon your knees,' said she.

Foscani laughed and turned to close the door.

She made a gesture of protest.

'Leave that. I prefer it so.'

'And if I do not care to sit in a draught, Madam?'

'You will not be asked to sit, Monsieur.'

At that he laughed outright and raised his hands.

'I am astonished you should be afraid of a closed door,' he said, 'but since it is my custom to respect your wishes, it shall stay as it is.'

Tossing his fur cap upon a table, he dropped into an armchair facing her.

Bettany rose and looked him up and down with insolent contempt. But a man without feelings is not easily discomfited.

Stretching out his legs, Foscani smiled at her whimsically.

'While we are alone,' said he, 'there is no need to treat me with ceremony. Be at ease — sit down; for to speak the truth you look rather foolish standing there.'

The pencil held in her nervous fingers snapped with the sound of a toy pistol. She let the pieces fall.

'Why have you come?' she demanded, and bit her lip so that it turned from red to white and then to a deeper red again. 'Why are you here? How dare you come here — alone at night?'

'Does the hour offend you?'

'A visit from you at any hour is an offence.'

'Are you so conventional?' he replied. 'I am a busy man whose days are occupied putting into order the State which your family so ruinously oppressed. Some of my duties I must perform when time permits. You are not so vain as to imagine I am here to make love to you?'

'I imagine,' she answered, 'even your vanity would not be equal to making the attempt.'

Foscani scowled a little.

'You should be grateful,' said he, 'that you are still alive to welcome me.'

'I owe you no gratitude for that,' she answered. 'I

am alive because there are still many in Sciriel who love me and who would have risen against the revolution had I been put to death.'

'If that is true, Madam,' he returned, 'it is a wonder, from the patriotic love you bear your country, that you have not besought me to order your execution. As you have failed in that duty, it is clearly evident you love yourself better than Sciriel.'

He touched her there — sharply — poignantly, for his thrusts were ever pointed with half-truths.

The colour mounted to her cheeks and a wretched impotence robbed her of words.

'The reasons you were spared,' he went on, 'are several and obvious. You were spared because I wished you to be spared — because the revolution is a crusade of mercy and enlightenment — because you are little more than a child with time enough to learn better ways of living. Do not cheat yourself by thinking you were spared as a sop to the feelings of half-hearted Royalists, whose courage was of that kind that exclaimed "What a shame!" while their nobler-minded brothers were being shot down in the palace yard.'

Bettany moved to the window and, parting the curtains, looked across the roofs and spires of the sleeping city. In the street below was a murmur of voices and laughter from the waiting escort. The hoofs of restless horses rasped and clopped upon the cobbles. Regular as the purring of a cat she could hear the hiss of Foscani's breath. She could feel his eyes resting upon her. A loneliness and isolation beyond reach of words enveloped her, blotting out even the threat of danger his presence inspired. She longed for wings upon which to fly from it all — for a curtain to lower upon all of her old life with its little pomps and ceremonies — its patches of splendour and its final collapse into this

prisoned nothingness. Bettany's body went limp, her head tilted forward until her brow rested against the cool glass of the window.

Foscani rose.

'Poor, poor little girl,' said he, and his voice was as soft as a dove's. 'Poor little girl, who has been robbed of her toys and has no nursery to play in. Does the world, out there, seem so good to you that you must lean against the bars and look out?' He came nearer, but Bettany did not move. 'Why, you can see the eastern tower of the palace from here black against the sky. You lived there once as a princess, Natalie. Would it please you to return as a woman?'

Something in the smoothness of his tone stirred her to life again. The eyes she turned to his face were afire with antagonism.

'Would you please go? It is late and I am tired.'

'Soon I will,' he answered, 'but first I have something to tell you.'

'I do not wish to hear.'

'I am afraid you have no choice. Shortly I am going to Plevi, where I shall see your father.'

'You — why?'

'I wish to speak with him upon a certain matter.' He paused, looked at her, and went on. 'It is also possible I may order his release and deportation from the country.'

Bettany caught her breath — started to speak, but checked herself — and started afresh.

'You will not do that.'

'I may,' he answered simply.

'On what condition?'

Foscani stroked his mouth with a single finger, like a woman testing the softness of her lips.

'The conditions,' he said, 'are political, diplomatic,

and in a broad sense sentimental. You were right a moment ago to claim that many Sciriens love you, Natalie — perfectly right. I am not a Scirien, but I appreciate their feelings. Love in the hands of a ruler is a powerful ally. Love and authority combined is the strongest governing influence known to men. Napoleon had in himself that combination, so also had Pompey and some few others. I, alas, have not. I can inspire fear, confidence, and admiration, but I cannot inspire affection. I can rule men's bodies and minds, but I cannot rule their hearts. Now what a man lacks in himself, he must seek in another. You and I together, Natalie, would be irresistible.'

'Are you daring ——?'

'Do not use such big-sounding words,' he beseeched. 'There is nothing to which you are unaccustomed in my proposal. As Queen of Sciriel you would not have been free to choose a mate. You would have made a *mariage de convenance* and I demand no more of you than that. Save in name, there is little difference between Presidents and Princes.'

Now that the object of his visit was made clear, Bettany felt strangely calm and unmoved.

'As heir to the throne of Sciriel,' she answered, 'I should not have been asked to marry the man who murdered its King.'

Foscani nodded thoughtfully.

'It is a fair objection,' said he, 'but one that is overruled by precedent. There is no other method of dealing with troublesome kings than by execution. It was the revolution that killed your uncle — not I.'

'Was it not you who signed the order?'

'As the acknowledged head of the revolution I fulfil my duties, however unpleasant. In that distressing but inevitable affair there was no personal animus.

You, as one bred to the exquisite responsibility of rulership, should be able to take a broad view.'

'But thanks to the revolution that exquisite responsibility is at an end, Monsieur. If now I marry it will be a man of my own choice. You will understand, therefore, how your pretensions seem almost funny.'

'Madam,' said Foscani, dropping back into his chair, 'there are worse excuses for marriage than humour. If that is the way it strikes you, I do not complain. Indeed I look forward to our enjoying the joke together. I have paid you the compliment of putting what I had to say into the form of a proposal rather than of an order. But the form is of no consequence. My actions are influenced by a desire for the welfare of this State, and after earnest thought I have decided that a marriage between you and me would contribute to its advantage. I will not hasten you in the matter of dates, but I must insist that you instruct your thoughts to regard the arrangement as *un fait accompli*.'

Bettany's answer was cool as water.

'Monsieur, you have grown so accustomed to the belief that your will is law that I should waste time begging you to keep within moderate limits of decency. I have only this to say. Before enforcing me to take this step, as no doubt you are able to do' (Foscani bowed and she returned the bow), 'consider the effects of such an action upon your own reputation. I fancy that your colleagues of the black and crimson sash will raise objections that you may find less easy to dispose of than mine.'

Foscani's smile spread from feature to feature until his whole face was illumined with poised laughter.

'Verily the wrath of the sheep is terrible,' said he, and rose. 'I will not keep you from your bed. On my return from Plevi we will discuss this matter in detail.

Until then, Madam, your servant.' He bowed stiffly, walked to the door and turned. 'At least, we shall provide each other with plenty of amusement.'

'You may not live to appreciate it,' she answered.

'Death is always at our elbow,' he nodded, laughed, and added, 'With a potential Charlotte Corday for wife, I shall take the precaution always to lock my bathroom door. I do not wish to share the fate of Marat. Good-night.'

He closed the door, and Bettany listened to the stairs creaking as he went down. She did not move. Foscani gone was infinitely more menacing than Foscani present. It was as if he had left a threat in his wake that hopes of her own and the plans of others would be powerless to resist.

Baron Vilasto tiptoed gently into the room.

'Brave, brave Natalie,' he said. 'A little more patience and then an end of all this.'

'I want to cry,' said Bettany. 'Sidimir, I want to cry.'

16

Ten bodies lay against a wall and six of those bodies were dead — shot that day — by order of the revolution.

The remaining four, Raoul and Jean Festubert, Max Gourod, and Pierre Kressin, even though they did not look it, were intensely alive.

'What is the time?' Raoul whispered. 'Like a fool I am lying on my watch and it is risky to move.'

'Twelve twenty-five,' growled Max, who had disposed himself with the luminous dial of his wrist watch within a few inches of his eyes. 'Another five minutes, my boys, that is all.'

Jean Festubert stirred.

'It will be a loss if Cheyne is not with us to-night.'

'He will come,' said his brother reassuringly. 'Cheyne is not the man to miss a good fight. You have brought him a sword, Pierre?'

A short, stocky figure, bunched into the semblance of death, grunted affirmatively.

'Aye, and the hilt of it is making a pattern on my stomach. It was a bright idea to lie here among the bodies, Raoul, but it is damned uncomfortable in practice.'

A hiss of laughter came from the brothers.

'Where else could we have waited without being dropped on by the city wall patrol? These Tartars are a superstitious lot and dodge this locality at night.'

'Sst,' exclaimed Max sharply.

From near at hand came the thud of a body falling lightly to the ground. A figure came gliding along in the shadow of the wall.

A voice, soft as a breeze, murmured:

'Raoul!'

'Cheyne!'

Nikko, for it was he, started and looked down. All about him were the dark shapes of dead men.

'Where are you?'

'Here at your feet. Drop down, man, and lie still.'

Nikko obeyed, but it was an eerie experience to huddle among corpses in that place of death.

Almost in his ear someone muttered:

'The ration lorries will be passing in a few moments; we are to board the last one. The driver is a friend.'

In the heavy darkness Nikko stretched out a hand to learn by feel who had spoken. His fingers strayed across the features of a face that was cold as water. He withdrew them sharply. Then someone touched him:

'Take this and slip it on.'

'This' was a mask of black silk.

'Right.'

The mask fitted closely over the head and covered eyes and nose.

After he had put it on, Nikko lay very still. In the silence he could hear the ticking of a watch in the pocket of the dead man who lay beside him. It seemed strange that this mechanical thing should be going after the fingers that had wound it for the last time were stiff. Minutes passed before the drone of engines and the jar of wheels bumping on an uneven surface came to his ears.

'Here they come,' whispered Jean. 'The twelfth lorry, my boys. Wait till the convoy has passed, then after it.'

Sixty yards away a light shone upon the road, as with bumpings and rattlings the first lorry came through the city gates. Then came another and another.

The watchers among the dead counted their lights as they passed.

'Ten — eleven — twelve.'

'Away we go.'

Had any been there to witness it, it was a weird sight when the five men suddenly sprang to their feet in that place of death and started in pursuit of the retreating convoy. They ran like hares across the patch of grass where each day Foscani's firing parties assembled to carry out the glorious work of freedom.

Raoul Festubert was first to seize the dangling cord that hung from the iron hoops of the lorry cover and swing himself aboard. The rest followed in a bunch, their swords clattering against the tail-board as they scrambled in.

'Whew!' exclaimed Jean; 'and now for a smoke, my braves. After an hour in the place of execution my nerves need soothing.'

He tossed a packet of cigarettes to Nikko, who took one and passed it on.

'Where are we going,' he asked. 'How far?'

'Eight miles to a police post near the village of Scheza.'

'And the plan is?'

Raoul Festubert lit a cigarette and spread his long limbs across a heap of grain sacks.

'There are twelve good horses at that post,' said he, 'and eight bad men. We shall take the horses and truss up the men. They have already been rationed for a week, so it may be some days before the misfortunes they are about to sustain will come to light.'

Since the revolution Foscani had dotted the countryside with small police posts, whose duties were to stand by in readiness to take disciplinary action if the need arose. These posts were usually held in isolated farmhouses and were controlled by telephone from district headquarters.

Nikko nodded and Jean took up the tale.

'Lately they have found life monotonous, for Scheza is notoriously favourable to the revolution. To-night we shall enliven them.'

Closing one eye he looked along the edge of his sword.

'And their carbines?' Nikko queried.

'Chained together in the guard-room,' said Max, spinning a small black automatic on his forefinger. 'I shall arrange that they do not have time to unfasten the padlock.'

'But we hope there will be no need for shooting,' said Jean.

Nikko seconded that. In the Legion many forms of fighting had been in vogue, *la savate*, the bayonet, or braining one's adversary with the leg of a wooden stool, but pistol play, since it robbed a fight of its personal element, was held in contempt.

Max shrugged his shoulders.

'We must not forget they will be two to one,' said he.

Pierre Kressin laughed.

'He would enjoy best to walk in alone and do the whole business. Max is known as the spitfire of Somorno.'

And Pierre recounted a thrilling episode of the Great War, when his compatriot had strolled into an Austrian machine-gun post and polished off the whole of its personnel.

'Well, what would you?' Max protested. 'I offered the fools the alternative of coming back with me to our lines, but they refused. Aye, and one of them was reaching for a bomb.'

'It looks,' said Nikko, 'as though we might have a cheerful night to-night.'

For three quarters of an hour the lorry bumped and swayed over the uneven road. Presently it entered a wood.

Raoul put out his head and peered to right and left.

'Here we are,' he said. 'The post is a mile up this grass ride. No talking, remember.'

One by one they dropped to the road and turned into the blackness of the trees.

The ride ran straight for half a mile then switched to the left. In the distance a light twinkled.

'That is the guard-room,' muttered Max. 'The stables are to the right. There will be a sentry there. At least there was a sentry two nights ago.'

'One of us must deal with the sentry,' said Raoul. 'Max will go straight to the guard-room window and shoot any man who tries to reach the rifle rack. The rest of us will get to the floor above by way of a shed roof and wake up the men who are asleep.'

'Leave the guard to me,' said Nikko. 'When I have dealt with him, I will join you upstairs.'

'He carries a pistol, remember,' said Max warningly.

'It will be my fault if he has time to use it,' Nikko answered.

But Max was not satisfied.

'It would be simpler,' said he, 'if I dealt with the sentry. I should have plenty of time to shoot him and still reach the guard-room window before the rest could get to the rifles.'

From Pierre Kressin came a puff of laughter.

'Did I not tell you? That one, he is insatiable.'

But the original plan was adhered to. While yet a hundred yards away, Nikko stopped the little party and addressed them swiftly.

'It is understood that if anything happens to me you others will carry on. The Princess is to be rescued after dusk the day after to-morrow. Six of the horses will be ridden down halfway to Plevi and concealed at Guilimont Farm to act as remounts. The rest come back with us to Djevo. King Carelon and one other will meet you at the leech-gatherer's hut at eleven o'clock. After that you' — he stopped suddenly — 'after that we shall be under royal command. Messieurs, whatever those commands may be — whatever sacrifice they entail, give me your words and your hands that you will obey them without fail or without question.'

In the darkness of the forest ride the five men, one by one, clasped Nikko by the hand. The little party

broke up, Raoul, Jean, and Pierre to skirt round to the back of the building, Nikko to creep toward the stable, and Max Gourod, the pistol dangling from his forefinger, to crouch in shadow of a bramble until the signal was given.

17

As Nikko moved on hands and knees across the open space before the house his heart thumped with excitement. The opportunity had come at last to strike a blow for Bettany, the first blow in that greater combat which was to have its victory in her freedom. Since coming to Sciriel he had been living under the restraint never to reveal his true state of mind which, to a man impatient of delay and quick to take offence, is the severest ordeal he can be called upon to make.

In the Legion he had learnt all there was to know about taking cover, and it would have taken a penetrating eye to follow his course through the grass and rubbish that littered the clearing between the stables and the bush where Max was hidden.

Reaching a low stone wall that protected the little garden of the farm and keeping his body close against it, he wormed his way along to a sharp angle on the left. Keeping his head a few inches above the ground, he peeped round the corner with a single eye.

The stables were built in a three-sided yard. Their mud walls, plastered with blue distemper, glimmered phosphorescently in the dark. A man standing against them would have been plainly visible. But although he looked carefully on all sides, Nikko could see no one. Thinking that the sentry was probably inside with the horses, Nikko was about to withdraw his head, when a faint familiar odour filled his nostrils. He sniffed silently and caught the unmistakable smell of blacking.

Nikko dropped his eyes, and beneath them, not ten inches away, was a pair of boots. As he looked they moved, a slow shuffle, as though their owner was seeking to restore circulation to his feet. The sentry, too near to be seen and very much too close to be comfortable. Nikko froze like a stone, with half his head round the wall.

'Ah, ha, ha, ah,' yawned the man, and unconsciously grounded his rifle on the fingers of Nikko's right hand.

The sudden surprise startled from Nikko an involuntary exclamation, but at the same instant he twisted his hand free and, seizing the rifle at the small of the butt, he tossed it over the wall behind him.

'Mother of snakes!' yelled the man. And his huge face came round the corner.

Nikko lashed at it with an upper cut as he rose, then struck twice more.

The blows crashed home on the point of the man's jaw, knocking his head against the sharp angle of the wall. There was a crack like the sound of a nutshell trodden under foot. He swayed and pitched face forward into the dust.

From the house came the cry of, 'Guard, awake! Guard, awake!'

Max Gourod sprang from his hiding-place, darted across the open space, leapt the garden wall, and, springing upon the sill of the lighted window, kicked in the transoms with one blow of his foot. There was a shower of tinkling glass and shouts from the floor above. Then two pistol shots — one sharp and stinging — the other an angry bark. Someone squealed, 'Oh, you've got me! Devil, you've got me ——' The voice choked — there was a thump and an iron clatter as the chained rifle rack crashed to the floor. An instant's silence with someone coughing — a wet cough

that bubbled dreadfully, then a new sound, the rasp of steel against steel, and Raoul's voice, loud, exultant:

'Come on, my beauties! Hey, there! So do we fight in Sciriel!'

Snatching up his sword, which he had let fall when he attacked the sentry, Nikko raced for the house. Leaping through the broken window casement, passing Max Gourod and a body that was stretched across the floor, he went up the stairs four at a time. From the left at the end of a passage came sounds of a terrific combat, mixed with yells of pain and anger and jubilant cries. On the right a door burst open and a man in breeches and a shirt darted across the passage and disappeared into a lighted room opposite. Swift as an arrow Nikko was after him.

The man had picked up the telephone instrument, but before he had time to lift the receiver Nikko's sword severed the cable.

'Hell's curse!' cried the man. 'Take it then,' and flung the instrument at Nikko's head. There was no room to dodge, but Nikko lashed at it in the air, saving himself, but smashing his sword halfway down the blade. The man's hand fumbled at his belt. The candlelight flashed on the barrel of a pistol. As the bullet splashed into the plaster, Nikko side-stepped and took a leap at the man's legs. They came down together. The table went over. The light went out. In the darkness they fumbled for each other's throats. Again the pistol barked, its fiery breath scorching Nikko's cheek. A part of the ceiling came pattering down.

The man's left arm circled Nikko's neck with a grip like a python's. But Nikko had him by the pistol hand and, running his fingers swiftly upward, he found the ejector, and, giving it a sharp tug, broke the weapon at

the breech and scattered the cartridges upon the boards.

It put them upon equal terms, but the fight was not over. The man was very strong and his other arm was free now to join its fellow in that paralysing squeeze. Nikko felt his brain blacken and swim. His tongue shot out against the cheek of his adversary. Twisting his body sideways he jabbed his right knee with all his force into the man's stomach. Three times he jabbed, and at the third the grip parted as suddenly as a chain with a broken link.

'Euch,' the man gasped, and again, 'euch!' rolled over and was deadly sick.

Nikko Cheyne trussed him up with his own belt to the back of a chair and turned to join the main battle in the room at the end of the passage. He arrived in time to see the finals of what must have been a first-class fight. Upon the floor lay three of the police, not a whit less still than the victims whom, for the glory of the revolution, they had so cheerfully despatched. Upon one of these, a burly corpse with a heavy cavalry sabre still clutched in his hand, Pierre Kressin was looking with an expression of singular pride and satisfaction. Over a crouching figure stood Jean Festubert, while at the far end of the room Raoul was demonstrating his quality as a swordsman to a thick-set, blue-jowled fellow with a monstrous wen on the side of his face, who was exhibiting more vigour than skill in the art of fence.

'It is not that I mean to kill you,' said Raoul sweetly, 'but I admire you so greatly for continuing to fight after being called upon to stop that I positively must alter your looks for the better. So.'

His sword flickered for an instant along the man's cheek and the wen was gone.

'Which done,' Raoul continued, 'it only remains to remove that clumsy weapon from your hand and we can get to work.'

Again the sword flickered and the heavy sabre clattered across the floor. Its owner held up his hands in token of surrender.

Max Gourod, the pistol spinning at his finger-end, looked into the room.

'How goes it?' he queried. 'All well? Saints, but you have had some fun up here!'

Raoul wiped his sword on the blankets of a bed.

'We had to kill three — in self-defence. But these two are untouched. How did you fare?'

Max held up one finger.

'Through the heart and lungs,' he said. 'A clean shot considering all things.'

'I am afraid the sentry is out of it with a chipped skull,' said Nikko.

Jean looked up quickly.

'That leaves one unaccounted for.'

Nikko jerked his thumb in the direction of the passage.

'He's all right. Strapped snug to a chair, being sick.'

'Well, come!' said Raoul. 'As novices we have not done too badly. But what about these pretty fellows?'

'I am afraid they will be rather uncomfortable for the next few days,' said Nikko thoughtfully.

It was Max Gourod who hauled up from the guard-room a sackful of handcuffs. And it was he who supervised the manner in which they were used. Each man's right wrist and left ankle was manacled to the head and foot of his iron bedstead. That they might not starve, loaves of bread and a jar of water were put within reach of their free hands.

'Though in my opinion,' Max grumbled, 'it would

be a damned sight better to shoot the murderous bastards.'

The dead were dragged downstairs and laid out under sacks in a scullery.

On the kitchen fire simmered a pot of victuals, while a cupboard furnished wine of a generous quality. Before going for the horses, the raiding party supped very merrily and lifted their glasses to the health of King Carelon and his daughter Natalie Melliora Maria Elizabeta.

'For, by Heaven, my brave boys,' cried Raoul, his glass held high, 'what has been shall be again. God bless them!' Then, leaning across to Nikko, 'Why, Cheyne, what's come to you? An empty glass and you look pale as death. Were you hurt in the fight?'

'No,' said Nikko, and shook his head. 'No, I am not hurt — I was thinking, that's all — thinking.'

'To the devil with thinking!' cried Jean, and struck the table a heavy blow. 'The toast, man, for though you are no Scirien, I warrant you'll drink to their return with the staunchest in Sciriel. Fill up.'

'Taken standing,' thundered Max Gourod.

The five men stood up and clinked their glasses.

Somehow — for some reason too remote to be defined — Nikko was suddenly afraid.

18

It was an afterthought of Nikko's persuaded them to raid the wardrobe of the post and carry away six complete uniforms and sets of arms and accoutrements. As he and Raoul rode homeward with two lead horses apiece, he explained his reason.

'Dressed so, you will be able to keep to the road and pass through towns and villages on the night the attempt is made without fear of being stopped.'

'That's an idea,' exclaimed Raoul, 'but she ——?'

'The uniform of the little fellow Max shot will fit her well enough. She has the figure of a boy.'

Raoul looked surprised.

'You know her?' he said.

'Of course, for what other reason would I ——' Nikko broke off. 'Yes, of course I know her, Raoul.'

'You speak as though you were friends.'

'Yes.'

'I have only seen her,' said Raoul; 'it must be wonderful to have spoken to her, Cheyne.'

'Most wonderful,' Nikko answered simply.

Raoul rode silent for a moment, then:

'Yes — yes. I can well believe so. Where did you meet, Cheyne?'

'In Paris. Seven years ago.'

'Seven years. She must have been a child.'

'No,' said Nikko, 'she was not a child, at least to me she was not a child.' His voice sounded far away.

Raoul's eyes narrowed.

'What do you mean by not to you?'

'No more than that.'

'Cheyne,' said Raoul suddenly, 'you are in love with her.'

Nikko swung round in the saddle.

'And if I am — what of it?' he demanded. 'Have you — has anyone a right to prevent me?'

'No — no, I suppose, and yet ——'

'What?'

'Love — that kind of love is — almost treason.'

'Treason!' Nikko's eyes shone dangerously in the starlight.

'Of all men you and I must be the last to quarrel, Cheyne. I mean no offence. Every true Scirien loves Natalie, but they love her as an idea — and ideal, not as a woman.'

An echo from the past stirred in Nikko's memory, and once again the Maître Jean-Jacques Ribot was dinning into the dull brain of a Paris art student the first principles of a view broader than the details that inspired it. A sudden rebellion sent a wave of anger through him so that all his breast felt hot within.

'Have I said in what manner I love her?' he returned.

'Not by words.'

The hoofs of the horses drummed evenly upon the grass. For a while they rode in silence. Then Nikko:

'Cannot an idea — an ideal be also a woman?'

'It is seldom otherwise,' said Raoul, 'but Natalie is an ideal to inspire all men, not one.'

'A platitude,' Nikko scoffed — but knew that he did not mean it.

Raoul Festubert took fire, and leaned over in his saddle.

'You shall not say that, by God!' he cried, 'not in my hearing. You shall not cheapen loyalty by the word "platitude." The House of Montressor may have fallen into the mud; but to some of us, at least, Natalie is still Princess by divine right. As a foreigner you may not understand the significance of what I say, but while we are together, for your own sake, I would advise you to respect it.'

'For my own sake,' Nikko echoed.

'I said so.' Raoul's anger burnt up anew. 'Who are you, Cheyne, to talk of friendship and of love for Natalie as a man talks of a woman that one day will be his wife? You have stepped out of nowhere into our private lives and counsels and now would seem to think you have a right to shape them to your pleasure.'

'My life,' said Nikko grimly, 'belongs to Natalie to use or throw away as she pleases.'

Raoul laughed.

'Fine enough,' said he, 'but that gives it no greater value than the next man's. I ask again who are you?'

'A deserter from the Foreign Legion,' Nikko replied.

'A deserter!' In his surprise Raoul reined in so suddenly that his own mount and the lead horses reared upon their haunches. 'A deserter — from that rabble?'

'In that rabble,' Nikko countered, 'men kept their own counsels and did not inquire into other men's affairs.'

Raoul's eyes glinted.

'You accuse me of that — of curiosity?'

'Yes, curiosity, or any other name you care to find.'

'Then, by God, Monsieur, my curiosity shall prove more than skin deep.'

He leapt to the ground, gathered up the reins of the three horses, and dropped them over a stump. A moment later the light was flickering along the blade of his sword.

All his anger vanished, Nikko Cheyne looked down from the saddle.

'This makes me a coward, Raoul,' he said, 'for I cannot fight you. Our lives are not our own to waste in a quarrel — yet. Afterwards — if you are of the same mind — I will be ready.'

'Dismount,' said Raoul.

Nikko shook his head, then with a weary action trailed the back of his hand across his brow.

'Oh, man — man — don't you realise the perplexity I am in? What at first seemed so easy and so right, every day becomes clouded with fresh doubts. I came to Sciriel with one purpose alone, to free Natalie from the revolution.'

'I think,' said Raoul steadily, 'you came as an adventurer comes, in hope of gain.'

'God knows!' was the answer, 'but at least believe, Raoul, I would put her gain before my own.'

The point of Raoul's sword was lowered to the ground and his voice, too, fell to a lower note.

'I believe you,' he said. 'You have proved that to-night now — in refusing to fight.' Impulsively he came forward and laid a hand on Nikko's knee. 'I should not have suspected your motives, but love makes men selfish as well as noble. You may be a deserter, Cheyne, but first and last you are a man of honour. Forgive me — I was wrong.'

But Nikko shook his head.

Raoul swung into the saddle.

'We're a nice pair to serve a cause,' he laughed. 'Come, we must press on if we are to reach Djevo and get the horses hidden before dawn.'

19

THE horses were safely disposed of in an empty house, situated in a thicket which lay under the shadow of the city wall. As a result of a bomb the house had lost its roof and was of no use as a dwelling.

Raoul had chosen the place, and he it was who, to secure them from observation, had ridden each of the six horses up the wide staircase and stabled them on the bedroom floor.

'*Voilà!*' said he, emptying a ration of oats for each on the mildewed carpets and addressing them as friends. 'When you are tired of eating, here are beds to lie on and pictures to look at.' Then he kissed each horse on the nose, patted their sleek necks, urged them to behave nicely, drew the crazy blinds, and retired.

The rope by which they had descended still dangled from the city wall and by its aid Raoul and Nikko re-entered Djevo.

They parted near the bridge that spanned the gorge, and here Raoul put his arms round Nikko and gave him a mighty squeeze.

'We were fools back there, Cheyne,' he said, 'damned fools. But I love and trust you as a man after my own heart. To-morrow night at The House of Friends for final instructions, eh?'

In the near vicinity sounded the crisp footsteps of a patrol.

'Au'voir,' whispered Raoul.

The two men darted away on silent feet, Raoul to his lodging and Nikko, a bundle under his arm, toward the Elysées Gardens. It was still dark, but across the eastern sky a plume of grey and lemon stretched and widened.

There was little time to reach the roof of Bettany's house before day broke, and Nikko wasted none of it, but if the guard in the street below had happened to look up he could not have failed to see the dark figure that dropped from the spire of the cypress and disappeared behind the coping.

Dropping his bundle beside a stack of chimneys, Nikko crouched down and hugging his knee watched the red sun glowing behind the mountains and stretching out long arms of light as a waking man stretches himself at the start of day. The light grew and slowly all the land and city emerged through shadows and mists of melting opal.

Never had Sciriel seemed lovelier to Nikko than in this hour of waking. A dot, a beauty spot upon the face of Europe. Men had called it the jewel country set in high hills. Nikko looked toward the Palace, upon which the crimson and black flag of the revolution flapped insolently. A sudden desire with his own hands to tear it down set his muscles twitching. A jewel

country! — with the jewel worn on the trigger finger of a murderous ego-maniac.

Bettany's jewel — Bettany's Sciriel — and all those little ignorant people, the smoke of whose fires was rising in thin spirals toward the sky, were hers too. Her land, her cities, her subjects, her children, upon all of which he, Nikko Cheyne, had persuaded her to turn her back forever. And why not? There was no alternative. And suddenly Nikko hated Sciriel because there was no alternative. A few scatter-brained patriots whose days on earth were numbered. Plesna, the last stand of a loyal handful. Pitiable, pitiful Plesna.

His thoughts ran on.

If there had been a hope — but there was none. His whole future then and the happiness he and Bettany were to find together had its foundation in that hopelessness. Their love rising out of ruins — but splendidly. Men and women have their lives and loves to make and little time for the making.

'Oh, my dear, my dear,' he whispered, and bending down kissed the cold leads above the room in which she lay asleep. 'Bettany, our love is stronger than regrets — I'll never let you be sorry, Bettany.'

Crouching, head down, he seemed to hear her give a sigh — he seemed to feel her breath against his cheek.

He did not lift his head, but with eyes shut, rested it against the roof, saying how he loved her and calling to her in whispers no louder than the rustle of a leaf.

'Bettany, do you hear? Bettany, Bettany.'

20

Baron Vilasto was roused from sleep by a light touch on his hand. He blinked, stirred, and sat up. Bettany, in a white wrap, was beside his bed.

'My child, what is it?' he asked. 'Are you ill?'

She shook her head.

'I am going onto the roof,' she said.

He held his watch to his ear and touched the spring.

'But it is only four o'clock.'

'Is it? — I didn't look at the time — but I thought I would tell you where I had gone.'

'You seem strange,' he said. 'Give me a few moments and I will come with you.'

'No, Sidimir. Nikko is there.'

'Cheyne! but the trap was locked — why do you think —'

'I am sure, I felt it — he woke me — calling.'

'But that was dangerous.'

'No, not aloud — just a message I ——'

Suddenly she seized his hand and clung to it.

'You are frightened,' said he.

'I — am — rather — frightened. If he were not there, it could only mean — that —— But he is — must be. I'll soon ——'

She ran silently from the room, lowered the trap-door steps, and unlocked the padlock. Before lifting the trap-door she hesitated, and when she stepped out on the roof it was with her eyes shut and not courage enough to open them.

'Coward, coward,' she reproached herself, and pushed back the lids with her fingers.

To all appearances dead, Nikko Cheyne sprawled face downwards on the roof. She ran and fell on her knees beside him. He was breathing — he was asleep. With a little cry of thankfulness she picked up his head and laid it in her lap as though he were a child. Nikko stirred, but did not wake. She pulled the bundle he had brought toward her to make a rest for her back and moved her hands over his hair. A happiness too in-

tense for words stole through her as she held him there and looked down into his face.

He was so young asleep — so clean — such a boy. At the corners of his mouth a smile played, and the colour of his eyes shone through the shut lids.

Every line she remembered — and her thoughts went back across a gulf of seven years to that tragic meeting in the hotel at Paris, where to fill the emptiness before her she had stored a picture of his face to carry for all time in her heart.

The picture had not failed, and looking on him now was like holding up a true memory before a mirror. Nikko moved his head and a small island of doubt gathered between his brows.

'No,' she whispered, and, stooping, kissed his forehead, 'not that look, Nikko. There is no need, my lover.'

The island vanished. He gave an easy sigh, rubbed his cheek against her hand, and settled into deeper sleep. Time stole onward — shadows shortened — the sun clambered up into the sky.

It was nine o'clock when Baron Vilasto came out upon the roof. He had brought a bowl of coffee and a roll.

Bettany shook her head and laid a finger to her lips. Vilasto nodded, set them down beside her, and retreated quietly.

Perhaps the sense of another presence startled Nikko to sudden wakefulness. He sat up and stared at Bettany wildly.

'Hush,' she said. 'There is no one here.'

His expression relaxed.

'I was asleep — I shouldn't have been asleep. Someone — anything ——'

She shook her head.

'This little kingdom is still my own. We are safe here.'

'How did you know ——?' he began.

'You called me — and I came.'

'You heard?'

'I felt — and then I found you asleep.'

'For how long have I ——?'

'Three hours — four, perhaps. You must have been tired to sleep with your head against the roof.'

'Was it?' he answered. 'I — I dreamt ——'

He looked down and saw the creases his head had made where it had rested in her lap. He picked up one of her hands and held it to his face.

'That couldn't have been a dream.'

'Nikko, Nikko,' she said. 'I loved you so lying like a child in my arms.'

'I have wasted the most precious moments of my life,' he answered reproachfully.

'I loved you so,' she said again. 'It was like when we were in Paris — together — not saying a word — but together.'

He looked at her devotedly — devouringly.

'Was that enough to make you forget all else, Bettany — will it be enough?'

She gave an infinitesimal movement to stop him.

'Let us ask nothing to-day,' she said. 'To-day is utterly ours, Nikko. Until to-night we two are all that matters.'

'You're wonderful,' said he. 'When shadows wide as a country stretch between us you step through them and they are gone. A hundred things have happened, Bettany, that I am here to tell. Aren't you curious? Am I not to begin?'

'Yes, oh, yes, soon — we have all the day. Until to-night you are my prisoner, Nikko.'

'Until to-night?' he laughed. 'Forever!'

She moved her shoulders.

'And I yours — I yours. It's good — it's lovely to be sure of that.'

She gave a shiver of delight, passed a hand almost roughly over his face and laughed.

'We'll have breakfast now, Nikko, our first together.' And, putting the coffee bowl between them, she broke the little roll into halves. 'I can get more if there isn't enough.'

'I was only hungry for you, Bettany.'

'But you must eat, please do.'

She watched him swallow a mouthful of bread and take a gulp of coffee.

It tasted so good that he took another.

'That's better. What is that bruise on your throat, Nikko? All blue it is.'

'We had a fight last night.'

'We?' Interest sparkled in her eyes.

'Raoul and Jean Festubert, Max Gourod, Kressin, and myself. We were getting horses.'

'Yes.'

'We got them all right.'

She was silent for a moment — then:

'I want to know, Nikko. It isn't away from our love - it is part of it. I want to know all that has happened to you — little — big — all. I've been a prisoner here for ten months. One almost forgets there is a world. And you must want to tell. Only women put love by itself in their hearts. With men it is one with the rest of their lives. They carry it with them into action, into their work, into everything. Tell me how you have worked and loved me since you came to Sciriel.'

While he talked she sat with her chin resting on her knees, sometimes nodding — sparkling — shrinking.

Once she said: 'What a broken little country!' And there were tears in her eyes.

And when he spoke of Foscani:

'He was here last night. No, keep down. You would be seen from the street, standing.'

At the end:

'To-morrow night. I shall be ready.'

'The uniform you are to wear is in this bundle.'

Bettany gave a small gesture of disgust.

'Very well. But what a finish, Nikko — to ride away wearing ——'

She saw the look of pain on his face and hastened to smooth it away with an impulsive pressure of the hand.

'I should be ashamed to have said that. Forget it. Pride — just vulgar pride. Yes, go on. I am to be dressed ready after dusk.'

Nikko nodded.

'Yes, that is all. We shall decide to-night the exact method before I start for Plevi.'

'I am glad you are going to Plevi,' she said. 'I shall feel certain that way. But, oh, Nikko, I wish you could be here as well.'

'If you knew how I wished that——' he began; then switched to, 'But they are splendid fellows. You can trust them to the death.'

'So there are still a few who love me.'

'Bettany!'

Her voice fell to a lower note with a touch of bitterness.

'But so few that I am no longer worth while ——'

From the distance came the pulsing of a drum, bugle notes, and the tramp of marching men.

'What's that?' she asked.

Nikko listened and the sound grew. There were

voices now, singing the rough new songs of the revolution.

'Freedom, freedom, God has given freedom.
Freedom, freedom, bear the banner high.'

'One of Foscani's patriotic marches,' said Nikko, and shrugged his shoulders. 'There was an order posted in the streets yesterday bidding all who were not engaged in work to join the march.'

The sound increased in volume.

Bettany rose, moved across the roof, and leaned over the parapet.

'Hundreds,' she said, 'hundreds of them, with his guards as sheep dogs.'

Keeping low, Nikko went toward her and peered through a square rain-vent into the street.

The procession, headed by its makeshift band and a squadron of the civil guard, was moving toward the house. It was a tatterdemalion company, impressed, mainly, from the slums of Djevo, but toward the tail-end marched a hundred or more decent citizens having, as it were, gathered themselves together in a class of their own. These better-looking folks seemed to have attracted to themselves quite a number of the guard, who by voice and gesture were urging them to give evidence of patriotic fervour.

'Sing up, you fat-bellied hogs!' a mighty voice shouted. 'Sing!'

The cadences of the foolish vaunting song rose and fell.

Bettany drew herself up and stood erect as the procession came before the house. Someone saw her, pointed, and as though by an order common to all the sea of faces turned upward.

The song stopped, the whole procession halting in

its stride. Someone laughed. A figure dressed in the filthiest rags hopped out into the roadway, danced like an ape, and made derisive gestures with his hands.

'Yow, yow, yow!' he yelled. 'Yow, what does freedom taste like?'

And suddenly from among the decent burghers leapt a fat man who beat clenched fists into the leering face. In an instant two of the guards fell upon him.

Then a voice — voices rang out:

'Let the man be! Leave him! He was right to strike!'

And another voice:

'Natalie! Natalie!'

And twenty throats roaring 'Natalie!'

A whistle blew. The mounted guard at the head of the procession wheeled their horses and spurred with sabres bared toward the centre of the tumult.

Someone shrieked. A pistol barked. A fight broke out in the crowd itself. Tearings, clutchings, the thud of fists against faces.

Someone cried:

'To hell with Foscani! Down with the revolution!'

An officer with a voice like the roar of a cannon shouted:

'Clear the street! Clear, you scum, or be shot!'

Madness was abroad. Many fled, but a little band, in which a spark of old patriotism had suddenly flared, rallied, bunched, and shouted back defiance. As if by magic a space was cleared on both sides of them.

'Set her free!' was their battle-cry.

A shutter on a ground-floor window was flung open and half a dozen rifles squibbed and squibbed again. The bullets slapped into unprotected bodies. In that close-packed group of foolish martyrs the dead had no room to fall.

The mounted men rode in with their sabres, re-

sistance crumbled — the remnant broke and scattered.

Then silence — then that voice again herding together those who had stood aside:

'Fall in! March! Sing, hogs, sing!'

The drum throbbed, bugles blared, the procession moved on.

Bettany had not stirred. Erect as a pillar she stood looking down upon the quiet corpses that lay in such strange shapes upon the road. At last ——

'They died for me,' she said. 'For me, and I shall never even put a flower on their graves.'

21

At noon a message came from Foscani to apologise to Bettany for what had taken place before the house. He trusted that she would not allow it to interfere with her peace of mind. Steps, he assured her, would be taken to prevent any recurrence of the outbreak.

Steps were taken, and during the afternoon there were fires in several parts of the city, when certain good citizens, suspected of having taken part in the riot, perished with their families in the flames.

A little before dusk an open cart came and collected the dead bodies. As the driver drove away, he shouted, 'Dead Royalists! Dead Royalists!' over and over again, as though he had wares to sell.

Since the tragic affair there had been many comings and goings to and from the house. Visits were paid by several members of the D.S.N. and the captain of the guard was complimented on the admirable shooting of his subordinates.

Fearing someone might come up to her floor, Bettany left the roof and sat miserable in her little room, while Nikko crouched on the leads behind the chimney-stack and counted the hours until darkness.

A plan had developed in his mind directly arising from the morning's tragedy, and seated alone up there he worked it out in detail. Only one thing troubled him, but he did not see how it could be avoided.

'And, anyway,' he said to himself, 'murderers deserve to die and Max Gourod will sleep none the worse for his part in the business.'

Toward dusk Bettany stole up to the roof and gave him food and drink. For half an hour they were together. He told her the arrangements he had made and she nodded her consent.

'I shall wait now, until you go,' she said; then she shivered.

'It's cold for you here.'

'It was not cold made me shiver,' she said; then cried out, 'Oh, dear, my lover, I don't want you to leave me! I'm afraid.'

'We shall succeed, Bettany.'

'Not of success, but — but — Nikko, stop me saying any more — my mind is whirling with terrors that spoken might come true.'

'Bettany!'

He drew her to him and kissed her mouth, her eyes, her hair, until slowly her muscles ceased to twitch and she lay limp in his arms.

A clock struck nine.

Nikko stirred uneasily.

'You must go?'

He nodded. She clung to him.

'This day was spoilt for us by martyrs, Nikko, but we have other days.'

For a long moment they held each other tight.

'God bless you, dearest, dearest.'

'God bless you, lover.'

He vanished like a ghost, and though she peered

down into the garden she saw nothing of the path he had taken.

22

A LITTLE after the half-hour Nikko Cheyne appeared at The House of Friends.

The four had already gathered, Max and Pierre having arrived but five minutes earlier.

'A lift on that same ration convoy,' Max explained. 'Else we should not have been here before to-morrow's sunrise.'

'It is fixed for to-morrow night,' said Nikko. 'Here is the plan.'

He expounded swiftly, but exactly.

'I dared not trust to the tree. If the sentry below were to see, he would fire and — after all, the brutes shot unarmed men for sport to-day.'

'I was there,' said Raoul, his face white with anger. 'I was there, and because of what was before us I skulked with that gutter filth while the murders were done.'

'I am only afraid of the noise,' said Nikko.

Max Gourod waved him down.

'I have a pair of .22 automatics,' he said. 'Very quiet and with a reduced charge — it would be at close range.'

Nikko nodded.

'They have revolvers.'

'Bah!' said Max Gourod. 'I shoot with both hands. Besides these others will be there, while Pierre attends to the sentry.'

'Is everything understood?'

'Everything.'

'You won't fail?' said Nikko earnestly. 'For God's sake don't fail.'

'Never fear,' they said in chorus.

He gripped the hand of each man in turn.

'At the leech-gatherer's hut, then?'

'We shall be there.'

'Luck, then.'

Nikko Cheyne went back to Mekla's house, where he saddled his horse, mounted, and rode down to the city gate.

'Who goes?' cried the sentry.

'Friend. Do you want to see the Liberator's signature on a pass?' — and Nikko fumbled in the breast-pocket of his coat.

'I have seen it often enough on every wall,' said the sentry with a gruff laugh. 'Pass out, friend.'

Nikko spurred through the gate, turned on to the grass by the place of execution, and cantered beneath the wall to the house where the horses were so queerly stabled. Here he changed into the uniform of the mounted police, buckled on the sword, and dragged a hard-bitten roan mare down the stairs to the hall, where by feel alone he saddled and bridled her.

'Thirty-five miles, my beauties, to the halfway house,' he said, 'and no stopping by the way. Come on, now.'

Dropping a carbine into its leather bucket and bringing the mare alongside his own mount, he swung to the saddle and galloped away into the night.

The great adventure had begun.

At the halfway house, a deserted farm standing back a quarter of a mile from the road, he changed his sweating horses for two of those that had been left in the outbuildings by Max and Pierre on the preceding night. The new horses were fresh and lively and stretched to their task with fine spirit.

A few hundred yards from his starting-point was a

crossroad, one leading to Plesna, the other to the frontier. Nikko took the latter. From the farm to Plevi as the crow flies was something under thirty miles, but in the uncertain dark Nikko thought it safer, even though it meant an increase in distance, to keep to the road.

The hoofs clattered merrily through sleeping villages, but though dogs barked no one looked from the windows to see who rode so hard.

Nikko came to the leech-gatherer's cottage a little after two o'clock. The pond at the back with its loathsome population reflected a single star as he rode by. Two o'clock. Fifteen miles to go and still an hour and a half of darkness. He slackened the rein and let the horses make their own pace along the mysterious road that wound through the Forest of Svorzo. It was an uncanny place — a place full of ill omen and of a silence like the grave.

A white owl flapped past him on silent wings, the wind of them stirring his hair, and the dismal howl of a wolf echoed among the trees.

Nikko breathed a sigh of relief when of a sudden he felt the cool of open spaces and looking up saw the stars shining in the heavens and before him the lights of the prison of Plevi.

The barn was to the right — three hundred yards away and easy enough to find. A solid structure, for all that there was a hole here and there where mortar had crumbled between the blocks of rough-hewn limestone. Nikko rode in and, closing the great door behind him, let the bar fall into its slot.

Loosening his horses' girths, he tethered them to the hay grid of a manger. Then, standing with his back to the prison, he struck a match and looked about him. In one corner was a litter of hay — and beside it a loaf of bread, a sausage, and a jug of water.

A clear message that Savarin meant to keep faith.

With a sigh of relief Nikko dropped down upon the hay and, closing his hand round the butt of his pistol, fell asleep.

END OF BOOK III

BOOK IV

The Gentlemen of Plesna March with the Sword

BOOK IV

THE GENTLEMEN OF PLESNA MARCH WITH THE SWORD

I

NIKKO awoke to the sound of low, grumbling explosions. The prison gangs were blasting in one of the quarries near by. Looking through a gap in a wall he saw columns of yellowy blue smoke rise, mushroom, and melt with the bursting of every charge. Upon an eminence half a mile away dominating a pit the shape of an escallop shell stood a number of warders, their rifles held at ease. In the pit grey figures moved like maggots in a carcase.

Between the pits and the stone pile of Plevi Prison was a constant coming and going of chained gangs. Nikko was too far off to see the faces of these men, but from the way they dragged their feet it was clear they were in advanced stages of exhaustion and despair. As they stumbled along, he could hear the clink-clink of the chains that united them.

And these poor cowed creatures less than a year before had been the proudest gentlemen in Sciriel. Bad food, hard usage, and the indignities of prison life had brought them down to the level of scavenger dogs.

The warders who walked beside them carried revolvers and heavy whips which they did not hesitate to use.

Degradation is never a pretty thing to watch. The whole place was a blot—a scar on the lovely landscape of Sciriel—and Nikko turned away in angry disgust.

Sitting on the hay he attacked the loaf and the

sausage, but after what he had seen of the poor starved wretches near by he felt ashamed to eat. Rising, he carried most of the bread to the two horses and fondled their warm smooth noses and sleek necks, and talked to them in low whispers of this and that.

And so an hour went by. As yet he had not looked at his watch, but when he did he was surprised to find that it was after two o'clock. He had slept much longer than he imagined, for which he was grateful. Nothing in the world is more wearing to the nerves than the hours of waiting before action.

The growl of the blasting echoed dismally among the mountains.

For want of something, of anything, to do, Nikko clambered up a broken ladder to the loft. From here, through gaps where tiles had fallen or twisted, was a panorama of the countryside — the prison, the quarries, the white road along which he had travelled the night before, the mighty Forest of Svorzo, and beyond that the mountains of freedom.

With a little imagination he could almost fix the exact spot on their steep blue sides where the road passed through the frontier post and where, with the morrow's dawn, the last fight was to take place.

And after that ——

A nervousness almost pitiable — contemptible — shook Nikko Cheyne from head to feet. What if something went wrong — some accident — some failure? Suppose Raoul muddled — suppose the gallant four were shot down at the city gates? Or a pursuit — Bettany overtaken, and ——

Sweat poured from his forehead.

'Damn you, stop thinking!' he said to himself and beat his fists upon his thighs. 'Stop thinking!'

In a corner of the loft neatly stacked was a pyramid

of long narrow tins. Nikko picked up one of them and examined the label.

Dynamite cartridges of the kind used for blasting. Beside them was a box of electrically operated detonators to which were attached neatly wound coils of insulated copper wires. Evidently the loft was used as an explosive dump for the nearest pit.

In the Foreign Legion, whose members do many jobs besides soldiering, Nikko had taken part in building a military road through the Atlas Mountains. He had been in charge of blasting operations and was familiar with the handling of explosives. Then, however, they had used slow fuses and the electric detonators were new to him. For something to do he occupied himself taking one of them to pieces with a penknife and fitting it together again. It was a clear-cut bit of mechanism, the ends of the fuse wires in the detonating cap being connected by a fine filament of platinum embedded in a gun-cotton priming on top of a charge of fulminate.

Nikko had put the fuse back in the box when a fantastic idea recurred in his mind. At first he dismissed it as absurd, but the idea refused to be dismissed. Collecting six of the dynamite cartridges and as many fuses, he carried them down the ladder and packed them in the leather pockets of the police saddles.

It was five o'clock when from sheer boredom Nikko returned to the loft.

The gangs were being driven in from the pits to the walled yard. The warders had left the eminences upon which they had been standing all day and were returning toward the prison.

Above the prison roof a feather of steam appeared and a siren hooted — thrice. The sound echoed and reëchoed along the range of sullen hills.

'Hoo — hoo — hoo! Hoo — hoo! Hoo!'

It was followed by the yelping bark of a Klaxon horn.

Nikko Cheyne spun round quickly.

At the spot where the road emerged from the forest a car appeared followed by another and yet another. On the radiator caps of each car fluttered a little flag of black and crimson silk. The first and last cars were filled with men wearing the horizon-blue uniform of the civil guard, but in the middle car a tall figure dressed from head to foot in black sat alone.

It was Foscani.

Even at three hundred yards' distance there was no mistaking him. He sat motionless, his great white face lit with that curious and unfeeling smile.

Next to the chauffeur sat the huge Arnaut, Serge, who had ridden up to Nikko in the Square on the night he arrived in Djevo.

Foscani had kept his word and come to Plevi — a day — one day too soon.

Fingers cold as death clutched at Nikko's heart.

The prison gates were flung open.

Foscani and his bodyguard drove through.

2

In the hour that followed, Nikko's spirits touched the very foundations of despair. With the coming of Foscani it seemed inevitable that their plans would crumble.

Savarin would be relieved of his command and then and there transported back to Djevo. Or else Foscani would stay at the prison for the night, robbing Savarin of the chance to fulfil his part of the bargain. There seemed no possibility that the scheme would go through. Then he, Nikko, would ride to meet Bettany and to tell her he had failed — and then — anything.

With a drawn face he sat and stared while picture after picture of failure and disaster shaped in his mind.

Over the top of the outer wall he could see the farther side of the prison yard, packed solid with gangs of waiting convicts. And then, upon the main steps at the prison door appeared Foscani and his bodyguard, Savarin, and a squad of warders.

For one moment Nikko's heart leapt. Could it be possible that the party was about to leave? The hope was short-lived. Foscani held up a hand, his inevitable preliminary to a speech. In utter impotence Nikko Cheyne covered his eyes with his hands.

3

FOSCANI held up his hand, and at the gesture the swaying gangs in the yard below became rigid, poised, silent.

'Enemies of Sciriel,' he began and repeated, 'Enemies of Sciriel and traitors to the cause of Freedom, a complaint has been brought to me by your Governor of the treatment you sustain at Plevi.'

A growl of assent followed the words.

'He tells me you do not get enough food or enough kindness — that you are starved, beaten, and treated like beasts.'

'Aye, aye!' cried a dozen voices.

'But,' continued Foscani, 'I have looked into this complaint and find it is not justified by the facts.'

The crowd swayed threateningly. Here and there a whip cracked. The breech bolts of the warder's rifles clanged home with a metallic ring.

'Not justified by the facts,' Foscani repeated. 'I find you have food enough and to spare. Let the man who styles himself King Carelon be brought to me.'

A tall old man with a parted beard of pure white strode out of the crowd and approached the steps.

The shoulders of the uncrowned King of Sciriel were bowed from labour, but he bore his head high and his eyes were the eyes of a man whose courage is not dead.

Two warders closed in on him, but Foscani waved them away.

'Let him stand alone,' said he. 'Quite alone. Well, Carelon. Is it true that you lack for food?'

With a tremendous effort to keep his temper in check the King answered:

'Old men do not need much food.'

'But you have enough?'

'I have enough.'

Foscani looked at him slowly and his smile broadened. He nodded.

'I see you have. Your clothes fit snugly. Enough, even if not too much, Carelon. Titbits from the Governor's table, eh?'

'No.'

'Have you any complaint against the Commandant Savarin?'

'None; he has done his duty, I suppose.'

'None; he has done his duty, I suppose,' Foscani echoed; 'but, do you know, Carelon, I suppose otherwise. The Governor of such a settlement as Plevi, against whom complaints are not levelled, must clearly have failed in his duty.'

Savarin's hand twitched on the hilt of his sword. A murmur went round among the listeners. The huge Arnaut stepped from the bodyguard and ranged himself alongside his master.

'What have you to say to that, Carelon?'

King Carelon answered through shut teeth:

'I am not here to discuss your administrators, Foscani.'

A pathetic cheer was smothered almost before it had shaped.

'No, you are not here for that,' was the reply. 'Nor are you here, Carelon, to consume the rations of ten men a day as well as your own and thus put the State to cost of their burial.'

At this cowardly betrayal a horrified gasp rose from the onlookers.

'Liar, base liar!' cried the King, and, raising his manacled hands, he crashed them into Foscani's face.

No one saw Serge, the Arnaut, strike, but in the awful hush that followed the King's blow they heard a tearing sound as the curved knife ripped upward from stomach to breast-bone. Like a chicken with its head off, the old man, holding himself together with both hands, ran round and round in diminishing circles, before pitching face forward to kick out the dying sparks of his life in the dust.

It happened so suddenly that action was paralysed by amazement.

Then Savarin: 'You devils — you devils!'

His pistol flashed out, to be struck instantly from his hand.

'Seize that man!' said Foscani. 'Let him be shot here and now.'

And then with a roar like the roar of cannon the tempers of that multitude of captive spirits flamed loose. The lines swayed and broke. A warder disappeared under a sea of stamping feet.

The chained gangs pulled this way and that, tripping their fellows. From the prison steps the warders delivered a rapid *rafale* with their rifles. A squall of bullets swept the yard. But the wave of human wreckage was beyond fear of death. They bore forward, living dragging dead upon their chains.

Foscani's bodyguard, their master in their midst, carved a way through to where the cars were standing. Hands clutched at them, were severed, and left dangling. It was a miracle that they reached their objective, a miracle aided by the chaos begotten of hate. Then Serge, leaping forward over men's packed bodies, flung open the gates to let the cars go through. Foscani was in the last car now and at the wheel. He drove into and across a living barrier of five chained men, dragging them like a string of beads, two on either side and another beneath the wheels until the chain snapped. Serge leapt at the running-board as the car flashed by, but someone snatched at his ankle and, clinging, brought him down. He cursed, wrenched himself clear, and stamped on his assailant's skull, pulping it beneath an iron heel. But the car was beyond hope of reach, and behind him voices screamed, 'Death to the murderer!' With a glance over his shoulder and a snarl of hatred, Serge broke at full speed for the quarries.

Men, who a few moments before were captives, poured free through the open gates. The body of a dead warder was hurled on high, striking the spiked top of the wall and sprawling across it like a dirty rag on a bramble. On the steps the warders were using their rifle butts, for ammunition was exhausted, but one by one they were torn down to disappear into a tangle of yelling, clawing inhumanity.

A mighty fellow with an axe was cleaving the chains thatmanacled his brother prisoners. In the stone halls and corridors of the prison a dozen battles were raging. A uniformed body flung from a window struck the cobbles with such sickening force that it looked as though it lay half-buried in a trough.

Someone had reached the prison tower, and, seizing

the halyards of the black and crimson banner, brought it fluttering down to an accompaniment of shrieks and yells from those below.

A cry lifted:

'The magazine! To the magazine!'

A rush of feet and in the distance the crash of a shot and laughter.

On the flat roof four dust-coloured figures chased a warder in and out among the chimneys and water-tanks like children playing touch. For a while he eluded them, but at last ran into the arms of his pursuers. A swift struggle — a baffled cry — the lid of a tank was raised just far enough for something to be hurled through the gap — a splash and the lid fell back into place again, and then the dusty figures danced upon it and drummed their heels or crouched to listen to the bubbles.

The doors of the ration store were forced and its contents were tumbled out into the yard. Hungry men, with the lust and ecstasy of food in their eyes, burst open cases, split sacks, and cast a hail of loaves among their fellows.

An orgy of killing — an orgy of food — an orgy of destruction.

Men sat and ate upon the dead bodies of their oppressors. Some, lost to all decency, screeched like gulls over the food, and, hiding loaves and grain and raw onions in their shirts, concealed themselves in corners, snarling when approached.

Through the prison doors raced a band more orderly, who cried: 'The fuses are lit! Stand clear — stand clear!'

There was a rush for the main gate — a convergence from all sides, those at the rear carrying those in front onward as upon the crest of a wave.

At the gate itself a hideous and solid wedge of bodies fought, struggled, and shrieked in panic. Many were crushed to death against the walls, others were trampled under foot, but of the two thousand wretched captives of Plevi seven hundred streamed out on to the open hillside, as with a grumbling roar the grey bulk of the prison heaved itself clear of the ground, hung suspended in a pall of black smoke, and settled into ruins.

4

From the loft of the barn Nikko had heard and seen the whole stupefying affair. Something had happened down there, but whether for good or evil he had not the remotest idea. He was too far off to guess what had started the flame. Foscani with his black figure was recognisable — but little else. He had seen a tall grey man with white hair lie down at Foscani's feet and then the storm had burst. He had seen the Arnaut fling open the gates and the three cars whirl through.

The germ of madness must have infected Nikko at that moment, for snatching up the carbine he fired at Foscani's car as it raced along the road. The bullet smashed the wind-screen, for Foscani threw up a forearm to protect his face from the flying glass. Nikko fired again, but too late, the car disappeared among the trees.

The next thing he knew was that Serge, the Arnaut, a blood-stained creese in his hand was racing up the hill toward the barn. Nikko covered and could have shot him with ease, but Serge changed his course and soon was lost to view in the forest.

After that he heard and saw in miniature all that has been described, down to the final rush into the open and the blowing-up of Plevi Prison.

Bewildered he sat down to think. Had Savarin

organised the mutiny — determined that with his chance of freedom those poor souls also should be given theirs? Surely not. He would never have risked an undertaking of such size, the success of which was so precarious.

No, the thing was spontaneous, he was sure of that, a sudden uprising with victory tossed by fate to the weak and the oppressed.

In the meantime, with the best part of a thousand savage men at large, his own position, dressed in the uniform of the mounted police, was far from secure.

What had he better do, he wondered? Wait for Savarin? Yes, if Savarin were still alive. But that seemed unlikely.

At any moment, some of those creatures, who already were wandering aimlessly about the hillside like homeless children, might discover his hiding-place and drag him down.

It would be wiser to take the horses into the shelter of the forest and linger there, but Nikko shrank from doing that. He had given his word to be in a certain place at a certain time, and his word must be kept. It was a matter of discipline. He had not spent seven years with one of the most highly disciplined military organisations in existence without rating discipline at its true value. Danger was never yet accepted as an excuse for breaking an order, even though it might be self-imposed.

He told himself he must hang on and trust to luck, but since he did not mean to be caught like a rat in a trap he descended the ladder and loosened several stones in the wall so that at a push they would fall outwards and provide him with a bolt hole.

The problem of whether to stay or go settled itself

in a mass meeting of the escaped prisoners, who collected at a spot not a hundred yards distant.

There they were harangued by a loud-voiced speaker, his words being carried on the breeze to Nikko's ears:

'There are two roads open to us, an attempt to escape over the frontier by way of the mountains, or to join our gallant comrades in the marshes at Plesna. If we stay here, in twenty-four hours Foscani's Rifles will descend upon us. If we split up into small knots, we shall be cut down by the mounted police patrols.'

The speech was constantly interrupted with cries of assent or dissent.

'Our only hope is to cleave together. The frontier is twelve miles to the west. Plesna perhaps thirty to the northeast. If we march to Plesna, we can obtain food by force from the villages we shall pass through. If we take to the mountains, it is likely we shall die in the snow. The choice rests with the majority — think well, gentlemen of Sciriel. Do we run or do we avenge? I put it to the vote.'

A chorus of yellings, stampings, and hundreds of voices speaking simultaneously, followed by a hush which after the Babel was infinitely strange. And in that hush the germ of self-respect was reborn. Arms were held on high and a growing roar broke loose:

'Plesna — Plesna — Plesna!'

The gentlemen of Sciriel had made the handsome choice.

It was pathetic to see those grey, wretched ranks fall into some kind of processional order. For weapons they carried picks and spades, bits of wood picked out of the ruins, and a scattering of rifles and swords plucked from the hands of dead warders.

At a word of command from their leader, they turned their backs upon the horrors of Plevi and faced the unknown. The evening sun glowed red as the last straggler passed over a fold in the landscape and was lost to view.

Nikko Cheyne brushed his eyes and found that his hand was wet.

To himself he muttered:

'She should have been here to see them make their choice.'

5

CRAWLING toward the barn out of the dust which still hung like a pall over the ruins of Plevi came a man.

The man squirmed on knees and elbows, pausing every few yards to recruit his strength.

It was Savarin, but not the Savarin of three hours before. His uniform was smothered with dust and torn in a dozen pieces. A black bruise spread across his brow and blood trickled from a wound in his throat. His left arm was broken at the wrist.

The bodily anguish he suffered would have clouded the minds of most men, but Savarin had a score to settle and a debt to wipe out against himself. Death was very near, but before its hands fastened upon him one set purpose should be fulfilled. He would reach the barn.

On and on he crawled in the lengthening shadows of the trees, his progress becoming slower as the hill increased in steepness.

He was less than seventy yards away when a shaft of light from the falling sun illumined his face.

With a shout of encouragement, Nikko Cheyne flung open the doors of the barn, and raced downhill, catching the broken man in his arms.

The huge Arnaut, flat on his face in some bushes not

twenty feet away, peered through a tapestry of leaves and checked an exclamation of surprise, as he recognized the Englishman.

'Savarin, Savarin, old man!' cried Nikko; and again, 'Savarin!'

With an effort Savarin forced his mind back to consciousness.

'You, Cheyne!' he whispered. 'You! Did my best, but failed — oh, God, by such a little. Tell her — did my best.'

'But the King? The King, man?'

Savarin's head moved from side to side.

'They — he — a fellow called Serge — one of Foscani's body-guard. It was because of that they rose ——'

'What happened?' In his suspense Nikko shook Savarin by the shoulders.

'He struck Foscani — the King — with his manacled hands — so that blood ran from — from his — smiling mouth. And then — that Arnaut. A knife — slit like a herring.'

Nikko's eyes were cold with anger.

'Dear God! I couldn't prevent it — I — I ——'

Savarin's head pitched forward on to his breast.

'Dead?'

Nikko Cheyne looked up into the rosy sky — a sky for lovers. He clenched his hands and a cry of bitterness broke from his throat. He had failed — failed — failed.

Aloud he cried: 'And I didn't even kill his murderer. I can't even go to her and say this, at least, I have done. Savarin, Savarin, we must start at once. If we ride hard we might reach the halfway house in time to meet her there. The horses are in the barn. If I tied you to the saddle, could you ride?'

Serge turned his eyes toward the barn and clicked

his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Silently as a snake he wormed his way back into the deeper shelter of the trees, then rising, darted from trunk to trunk like a ghost.

Savarin's voice came as from a great distance.

'No. Done. Sword point — throat. Dying. If you could help Elice.'

'Yes, yes,' Nikko nodded, and rubbed his chin desperately. 'I promise, but I can't leave you here.'

His back was to the barn, but a flitting shadow passed across the grass. Nikko turned, but saw nothing. The doors of the barn were wide open.

'I can't leave you to die in the open I —— What was that?'

The jingle of a bit and thunder of hoofs.

Nikko sprang to his feet as through the open doors burst a horse and rider. The Arnaut rode low in the saddle, his great blunt face appearing just above the horse's ears. In his right hand he held a revolver. Clapping in his heels he put his mount to a gallop straight for the spot where Nikko stood.

'Karaaa,' barked the pistol, and again, 'karaaa.'

Nikko leapt sideways and ducked, feeling the wind of the first bullet scorch his neck, and seeing the second cut a clean groove in Savarin's skull.

With a yell of triumph the murderer of King Carelon galloped on, wheeling to the right where the road was lost in the forest.

With scarcely more than a glance to assure himself that Savarin was dead, Nikko went up the hill in great bounds. There was only one thought in his mind now, to avenge the murder of Bettany's father. After that let the fates decide the future. At least he would go to her with one deed well done.

He vaulted into the saddle and, with rein and spur,

urged his horse down the grass slope and into the forest road at breakneck speed.

The road ran straight as a chalk-line across a board with scrub and bush and tangled trees on either hand. That his quarry would keep to the road he had little doubt, for the old forest rides, through the neglect of five years, had reverted to the wild.

It would be a straight race of fifteen miles with no side turning left or right until the leech-gatherer's hut.

A mile ahead through the blue haze of evening travelled a puff of dust. The Arnaut was riding at a killing pace that could not last the distance.

Nikko chuckled at the thought that his mount was the better of the two, and he had the advantage of riding at least three stone lighter.

He knew the little Russian horses to be of a hardy breed who, given a fair chance, would stay interminably. But the man in front was not offering fair chances; he was riding all out.

With the deadly earnest to kill and kill swiftly, only with the greatest effort Nikko persuaded himself to take the first stages easily and conserve something for the last. He checked the gallop to a twelve-miles-an-hour trot, eased his sword in its scabbard and released the strap of his holster. And so for seven miles. The dust-cloud ahead vanished. Night falls swiftly in a forest lying in the shadow of mountains, and soon all about him was drawn the breathing darkness.

Through a rift in the branches like a filament of silver shone a sickle moon. Was that a happy omen, he wondered, saluted it from the saddle, shook his rein, and broke afresh into a canter.

The little horse stretched joyously to his task, the thunder of hoofs echoing among the trees.

At a rough estimate three quarters of the distance

had been covered when Nikko drew rein and listened.

From nearer, much nearer than he had dared to hope, came the sound of hoofs trotting.

'We've gained,' he said to himself, 'we've gained.' And he spurred on relentlessly.

With his quarry within hearing, a savage exultation possessed Nikko to the exclusion of every other emotion. He scarcely noticed how far or how fast he rode until a few hundred yards ahead flashed significantly the upflung sparks of horseshoes striking against road metal.

Nikko jerked out his pistol and fired. The nickel bullet snapped savagely by the Arnaut's ear, struck a rock far on and whined harmlessly over the trees.

'Helah!' yelled Serge, and dug spurs into his horse's sides.

And then the real race began. A crazy gallop through the blind darkness, with not fifty yards separating pursuer from pursued. Nikko did not fire another shot. Crouched in the saddle, head down, hands low, heels tucked in, he urged his horse to the final effort. He could see nothing, but he could smell the hot sweat of the horse in front, and once a fleck of flying foam struck his cheek.

And suddenly the forest ended, the darkness fell away, and they were in the starlit open with the leech-gatherer's pond gleaming evilly by the side of the road.

Serge brought his horse up on all fours, swung round in the saddle, and fired.

Nikko pivoted in a sharp circle and the ball flew wide.

Again the pistol cracked, a jag of flame leaping from an outstretched arm. There was a flash of steel as Nikko's heavy police sabre swept downward.

The arm, with the smoking pistol gripped in its fingers, fell uselessly to the roadside.

Across the blank blunt face spread a look of childlike bewilderment and dismay, as with his remaining hand Serge felt in the air for the one that was no longer there.

Nikko lunged, and the huge man, impaled upon the sword like an insect on a pin, slithered backward out of the saddle and rolled into the pond.

A splash — silence, and a white face gleaming phosphorescently. And then, most ghastly of all, a torpid oily wave, a purposeful ripple, that moved toward it.

'There's thousands of them in there, thousands and thousands,' the old leech-gatherer had boasted.

Scream after scream pierced the quiet of the night.

The parasites were at work, their chitinous jaws sinking into the soft flesh of Serge's throat.

With a last effort the Arnaut reared himself up, clawing at a black sluggish collar that could not be torn away.

Nikko Cheyne fired twice. Slowly the face sunk, and only the hilt of an avenging sword showed above the surface of the water.

6

As the curfew of Djevo rang its warning bidding to all good citizens to keep within doors, four horsemen in the uniform of the mounted police rode through the city gate.

By the side of the last rider trotted a saddled horse. The uniform was passport in itself, and with a word of gruff greeting the sentry stood aside to let them go by.

'We shall be passing this way in an hour,' Raoul called, stooping over in the saddle, 'and likely shall be riding fast on work of importance. Stand by ready to open the gate and maybe grab a bottle of wine.'

'Good as done,' the sentry gave answer.

The cavalcade clattered on up the street, wheeled at

a side turning, crossed the bridge and drew rein before Natalie's prison.

The sentry on duty at the gate stepped up with rifle at the ready.

'Who's here?' he demanded.

'Reënforcements, brother,' Raoul answered, and leapt lightly from his horse, the other following suit.

'I know of no reënforcements.'

'Nor we, till half an hour ago. I have written orders, though.'

'Show them.'

'I'll show them to the officer in charge. Here, Pierre, hold the horses, while we three enter.' Then mysteriously to the still doubtful sentry: 'They want no repetition of yesterday's affair, and so are taking no chances.'

'Ah,' nodded the sentry. 'You may say so, friend. But these civilian dogs are easy meat.'

Raoul, Jean, and Max Gourod laughed, mounted the steps of the house, pushed open the door and entered.

Pierre Kressin, the horses' reins looped over his left arm, patted his tunic pockets with his right hand.

'Were you busy at yesterday's shooting?' he enquired.

'Busy. Three I shot—two rather—for one was a woman.'

'So,' said Pierre softly. 'A woman, eh! Well, well, it is all in a day's work. Hold these reins, comrade, while I light a cigarette.'

'She was ugly as sin and won't be missed,' the fellow chuckled.

'She is not alone in that,' said Pierre significantly.

With one movement he drew a life-preserver from his pocket and smote.

'Uncf!' sobbed the sentry.

That and the clatter of his rifle as it struck the cobbles

were the only sounds. Pierre Kressin slung the body over his shoulder and, entering the gate, dropped it inconspicuously between a bush of tamarisks and the wall. Then he returned, threw the horses' reins over a spike of the railings, and, shouldering the rifle, marched to and fro before the house in a brisk and soldierly fashion.

Guided by voices, Raoul, Jean, and Max opened a door at the rear of the house and stepped inside. At a circular table a number of men were playing dice. The stakes were tobacco and cigarettes, for with the withdrawal of the currency there was no money to play for. Yet even so tempers ran high. Liberty these men possessed and certainly equality, but fraternity was conspicuous by its absence.

As they entered a hot dispute was in progress which afforded Raoul an opportunity to make a swift count of heads. Six and the man outside, seven. One absent.

Aloud he said, 'Greeting, comrades. Here are three more children to swell your nursery.'

'Hey!' said a hulking fellow with shirt-sleeves rolled up to his deltoids. 'Hey, who's here?'

Raoul whipped out an official-looking envelope.

'For the officer in command,' said he.

'Then you'd best give it me, for he's in bed with drink.'

Raoul shook his head.

'Orders from the D.S.N. are precise,' he argued. 'I, for one, would hesitate to disobey them.'

A laugh went round.

'If you knew him, you would hesitate still more to arouse Sudemann in his present state.'

'I'll take the risk. First floor, eh?' Turning on his heel Raoul marched from the room and ran lightly up the stairs.

Jean Festubert closed the door behind his retreating brother, while Max Gourod, little Max of the indigo eyes, who up to this point had kept his arms crooked, dropped them straight to his sides. Not a soul in that room saw the little .22 automatics slide from his sleeves into the palms of his hands.

One of the men at the table pushed back his chair and cocking his head sideways demanded:

'What business has brought you beauties to our company, eh?'

Jean Festubert opened his mouth to speak, but Max interposed with:

'Shall I explain?'

Jean nodded and involuntarily shut his eyes. It was the pre-arranged signal. Max Gourod cleared his throat and began to shoot.

He shot to kill, for as he said afterwards, 'It takes no longer — and the murderers shot down unarmed men yesterday for sport.'

The bullets with their reduced charges made little more noise than a swift tattoo on a kettle-drum, but at the short range they did the business with efficiency and despatch. It speaks well for the skill of Max Gourod that only one man had time to rise from his chair, and he stumbled back into it again to loll his head between his knees. The rest sprawled this way and that with a limpness common to all.

Feeling strangely sick, Jean Festubert stumbled from the room, muttering: 'Give me the sword.'

Max Gourod was emotionally unmoved. He paused to reload and cast a technical eye over his handiwork. It was not that he had any doubts, but the affair was too important to take risks.

Then, with a grunt of satisfaction, he turned and followed Jean to the hall.

A door opened on the floor above and Raoul leant over the bannisters. His face was white and he swallowed with difficulty.

'Wouldn't fight — wouldn't fight properly,' he explained. 'It was ——' and shuddered. 'Is it all over down there?'

Jean nodded.

'Then we had best go up.'

Dressed in the uniform of the mounted police, Natalie awaited them. Like a boy she looked.

At first they did not recognize her, and then, being simple souls, went down on one knee, feeling as awkward as children in a strange house.

'Madam,' said Raoul huskily. 'The horses — if you are ready ——'

'I am quite ready,' she answered, and though her face was white and her lower lip quivered, her voice was firm as a rock. Then — 'I heard shots downstairs. Was there —— ?' and stopped.

'There will be no opposition, Madam. The good Max here has looked to that.'

'I thank him for his loyalty,' said she.

For the first time in his life Max Gourod blushed.

Natalie picked up the black and crimson sash of the revolution and held it out.

'I should wear this, I suppose.'

'It would be safer, Madam.'

'And safety,' she answered, with the least touch of bitterness, 'matters most. Sidimir.'

Baron Vilasto wound the sash about her slender body and tied the knot.

Impulsively she bent down and kissed his white head. Her voice broke into little pieces.

'Oh, Sidimir, Sidimir, what can you think of me in your heart?'

'A gentle and a gallant woman,' he answered, 'who has earned the love that is and will be hers. Good-bye, Natalie — and never a regret, remember.'

Rising he kissed her on both cheeks.

Then: 'Come, gentlemen, you have far to ride. I know that you will protect Her Royal Highness — this child — if need be with your life's blood.'

'But you, sir?' said Raoul.

'The old do not move far from their accustomed haunts. I shall go to The House of Friends.'

'Some day ——' Natalie began.

Vilasto nodded and smiled.

'To be sure,' said he, 'to be sure, my dear. God bless you.'

They stood aside as she passed out.

At the front door Raoul Festubert whistled once.

'How silent the house is,' she whispered, 'like the grave.'

A moment later the five horsemen clattered and jingled down the road.

Head back, shoulders square, bearing himself with the carriage of a young man, Baron Vilasto walked to the bridge.

'I am glad,' he said to himself. 'I am glad. Her youth deserves it.'

The spires of the old palace of the Montressors glimmered against the night.

'And yet ——'

He shut his mouth like a trap and walked on.

7

Raoul Festubert tossed a flask of wine to the sentry as they came to the city gate.

'Fates fortune you,' cried the fellow.

They rode out under the stars.

Where the road angled, Bettany looked over her shoulder — a last look at the city of Djevo — huddled roofs—the towers of churches—four corpses against a white wall — and behind all the mountains.

She did not speak, and the four who formed a living shield about her were silent too, awed by the size of the responsibility they had undertaken.

Parallel with the road was a grass track to which they kept to save their horses.

In the wood where two nights before they had raided the police post, Pierre Kressin nodded his head significantly. Seeing the action, Bettany forced herself to question its reason.

'There it was we found the horses, Madam.'

'I heard of that and of your bravery,' she said.

'It was a small affair,' Pierre answered. 'A small affair, save that Lord Cheyne was nearly done for.'

Bettany shivered, but said nothing.

Ahead gleamed the lights of Scheza. It was eleven o'clock when they came into that little market town. The streets were deserted, not even a dog barked. Once again they entered into the silence of the country.

Then Bettany said:

'You will think me a poor companion, gentlemen, but I am not lacking in gratitude— only — only ——'

'Ours is the cause for gratitude,' said Raoul.

'I wonder,' said Bettany, 'I wonder for how long you will feel that.'

'The answer to that, Madam, is measured by the length of our lives.'

'Don't,' she choked. 'Please don't. Chivalry hurts so.'

Then Max, urgently: 'Look ahead there.'

Against the skyline rose a plume of light, which every instant grew in size and intensity. The patter of engines throbbed in their ears.

With a common impulse the horses were wheeled from the track, galloped across a neglected vineyard and reined in behind a screen of cypresses.

Three motor-cars driven at speed raced along the road in the direction of Djevo. The headlights of the last car lit up the figure of Foscani seated in the back seat of the second.

'Whew!' said Jean.

Max Gourod fingered his pistols and grumbled low.

'If we had known!'

Raoul leant forward to whisper in Pierre's ear.

'Where has he come from? Heaven send he hasn't ——' and left the sentence unfinished.

From Bettany came a little hard laugh.

'A last glimpse of the master of Sciriel. Something — pleasant to carry away. Come, let us ride on — let us ride on.'

And thence onward she spoke no word while waves of anger—shame—and hope beat against her soul like water breaking over rocks.

At the halfway house, Pierre, Jean, and Raoul led the tired horses into the stable and saddled the fresh, leaving Max to mount guard over the Princess.

That she might not seem insensible of all that they were doing for her, she made an effort to talk — but little Max was not listening and two of her questions went unanswered.

'Monsieur,' she began again, 'is it not from this place a road runs to Plesna?'

'Madam I beg — there is too much cover here — your voice might be heard and ——'

With a sudden movement he gripped her wrist and almost rudely swung her behind his own body, crying out:

'Hands up, whoever you are.'

Twigs cracked, leaves rustled, and a figure stepped out of the blackness of a clump of trees.

'Max,' said a voice. 'Max.'

Into the starlight walked Nikko Cheyne.

Max Gourod's pistol dropped to his side.

'You here!' he ejaculated.

And Bettany echoed:

'Nikko, you here!'

'Yes.' Nikko's voice was dry as a stick. 'Max, join the others for a moment, I must speak to her alone.'

Max hesitated.

'I take my orders from the Princess.'

'Please,' she begged.

Max Gourod saluted, turned toward the stables.

Erect, with a hand pressed to her throat, Bettany waited for Nikko to speak.

'I have failed,' he said.

But she shook her head.

'No. If my father were alive, he would be here with you. Then why ——'

'The — Bettany,' he came nearer and took her hands. 'He is not alive.'

For a while she stayed very still; then:

'I think I knew. Please tell me all.'

'Foscani came to Plevi — unexpectedly. Your father was murdered by one of his body-guard.'

'You were there, Nikko?'

'I saw from a distance without understanding. It was in the late afternoon.'

Bettany's breath came short.

'By Foscani's orders, was it done?'

'He struck Foscani.'

'Struck him! I am glad, I am glad,' she said. 'At least he struck — he did not run away.'

There was a note of hysteria in her voice.

'And his murderer — the man who ——'

'An Arnaut — named Serge.'

'Serge. I must remember that.'

'There is no need to remember — I killed him — three hours ago at the place where we were to have met.'

'I am happier for knowing that,' she said, and once more was silent.

'After my father's murder — what —— ?'

'There was a rising. The captives fell upon their warders — tore them down — and blew up the prison.'

'And then ——'

'And then, Bettany, the finest thing I ever saw. They held a meeting among themselves, those poor starved gentlemen. A vote was taken as to whether or not they should break for the frontier ——'

'Go on.'

'At sunset they marched to join their comrades at Plesna.'

'Oh!' cried Bettany, with the cry of a wounded animal. 'And I, their Queen, can do no better thing than run. Nikko, Nikko, Nikko.'

He took her in his arms and held her tight.

'My dearest — my love — my everything,' he said. 'I want you to know I understand your mind. I want you to think only of yourself in this. Take whichever road seems right to you. Failure, disaster, doesn't matter. I want you beyond everything in the world, but more I want you to be happy. My life is only of use to make you so. If happiness is to be found away from Sciriel, let us go now and find it together; but if one half of your heart is to break that the other half shall be mine, then take whatever road seems right to you. Listen, my dear, my dear. For seven years I've longed

and ached for the you I'm holding in my arms. But there's another you, Bettany, that burns like a flame, a beacon stirring men's souls and making their spirits brave. I have tried to blind myself to the truth of that, but it was no use. Every day I've seen that beacon burning brighter and brighter. Those poor corpses who lay before your house while we stood upon the roof died in the light of it. Those boys in the stable there, the prisoners of Plevi, and the brave men who are facing death in the marshes of Plesna, what care have they how hopeless their cause may be while your beacon burns for them? Dearest, there is an idea so much greater than can be expressed or shared by one woman and one man. One can cheat oneself — but sometimes one sees that great idea in its simple immensity. I have to-night, and though to put the question is a torture, I have ridden back to this place, where the roads divide, to ask — what chance — what hope — what right have I to make you happy?'

When Bettany raised her head stars were shining in her eyes. She took his face in her hands and kissed him and pressed her cheek to his, saying:

'The chivalry. I feel I have never loved you until now — the greatness of that makes me afraid. But you are right, Nikko. We are only two people who love one another, and in a nation's eyes that's a small thing. But we know — and we can thank God for his gift.'

She shut her eyes, stood for a moment swaying, then drew herself up.

'Will you please say to my gentlemen, the Queen rides to Plesna?'

By the crazy doors of the deserted farm four awed and silent men knelt in the grass at the feet of their uncrowned Queen and kissed her hand and swore allegiance.

And Raoul Festubert gave her his handkerchief, for her own was lost, and she was crying.

8

To Pierre Kressin, who knew the mysteries of the marsh, had been given the honour to ride forward and convey to the Loyalists at Plesna the news of the murder of King Carelon and the coming of the Queen.

It was full dawn when, under the ægis of a guide, after two hours of tortuous windings through rush and reed and over great wastes of sun-cracked mud, the little party came to the river ford. It was that same river which in its earlier courses was fed by waters that had thundered through the subterranean galleries of the swallow hole at Issoi. On the far bank was a forest of pine and larch, and in a wide clearing they met those gallant gentlemen who for a year, in which they had endured every imaginable hardship and suffering, had defied the revolution and kept alight a flame of undying patriotism.

With the coming of Pierre Kressin bugles had sounded the general muster, and in answer men rudely startled from sleep raced from caves in the mountain-side, from little huts of wattle, from a tiny village which was headquarters of the force, and from every conceivable form of habitation.

The Royalists were commanded by a tall and spare man, Duke Ellerand of Svorzo, who, in the days of the old King, had been famous for the wisdom of his counsels, and whose love of country was second to none. The Duke had commanded the Scirien army during the war. It was to him that Pierre Kressin, with characteristic simplicity, delivered his message.

'King Carelon was murdered at Plevi and the Queen is crossing the marsh.'

Then something in the old man's eyes took fire, and emotions long held in check broke loose in the oddest way.

He seized Pierre Kressin by the shoulders and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, crying aloud:

'You lie — you lie!'

And this for the rapture it was to hear the message repeated by a man whose face was red with indignation.

Then the Duke of Svorzo took Pierre to his breast and kissed him repeatedly on both cheeks and clasped his hands together and breathed a prayer and gave orders that the bugles should be sounded.

Then that fantastic company, men dressed in rags and skins and wearing leggings made of bark, assembled and marched to do honour to their Queen. And for all their motley they marched like the Brigade of Guards, heads back, shoulders square, arms swinging, and thirty-three inches to the stride. They carried no other weapon but swords, but these and their eyes were bright.

It was a strange encounter, out there in the forest glade. At first they did not recognize their Queen, in the figure of a boy with the black and crimson sash of the revolution about her waist.

The Duke gave the order to halt. Then Natalie detached herself from her escort and rode forward, alone. She pulled off the black *calpac* and tossed it aside; the early sun turned her hair into ripples of dark flame.

And there went up so great a cheer that three miles away water fowl rose in wisps from the marsh, and Foscani's snipers beyond the river, whose duty it was to shoot down those lonely figures who crept toward Plesna through the reeds, looked at one another in dismay.

And then confusion, men breaking ranks and surging in masses about the girl who sat so still astride her horse.

'Natalie, Natalie, Natalie!'

The woods rang with the name.

Nikko Cheyne drew apart and watched like a man in a dream.

Love — emotion — enthusiasm — and over all the face of a girl shining like a white fire.

The girl, the Queen, and what a world stretched between one and the other!

Old men wringing each other's hands and crying, unashamed of tears — young men beating each other with shut fists to give expression to their ecstasy by pain, and a great strong fellow casting aside weaker that he might come near enough to touch even the boots she wore.

The smouldering embers at a breath of patriotism were leaping into flame.

The beacon blazed high.

Exhausted by its passionate fervour the tumult and frenzy calmed and the broken ranks re-formed.

At the head of her loyal subjects, with the Duke at her stirrup, the Queen rode into Plesna.

A young man wearing over his rags an armlet, to betoken the rank of a junior officer, came up to Nikko and saluted casually.

'You gentlemen will follow, after the companies have passed,' said he. 'Later you will be advised in regard to rations and accommodation.'

'Thank you,' said Nikko, and before he could check himself he threw up his head and laughed.

The young officer looked him up and down with a coldly critical stare, which relaxed into a look of pity.

'No doubt this night's work has imposed on you a great strain, and ——'

It was Raoul who looked swiftly from Nikko's drawn face to that of the supercilious youngster.

'Go to the devil,' said he.

9

TOWARD the middle of the afternoon an orderly presented himself at the miserable cottage where Nikko and his companions were billeted, with instructions that he should report at once to headquarters.

The Duke of Svorzo and his senior officers were seated at a long table in what once had been the village schoolroom.

At Nikko's entrance, he rose, bowed formally and shook hands.

'I fear, Lord Cheyne,' said he, 'that in the emotion inspired by the coming of the Queen, our gratitude to those who brought about her escape has been poorly expressed.'

Nikko began to speak, but the Duke held up a hand.

'To you in particular our thanks are due,' he went on. 'Not only in risking your life for a country that is not your own, but because your generosity may well prove the salvation of Sciriel.'

'I do not understand — my generosity ——'

'Through The House of Friends a letter from you was delivered into our hands, authorising a message to be sent over the frontier to a Mr. Joris Howard.'

'Oh, that,' said Nikko uneasily. 'Monsieur le Duc, I have more money than I know what to do with. I was told that the conditions here were severe — but that with money it was possible supplies from Jugo-Slavia might be smuggled over the mountains.'

The Duke bowed.

'We had no money, Lord Cheyne, for the revolution, which could not rob us of our spirit successfully, robbed us of our purse. But thanks to your faith in us and with the help of God the day is not very distant when we shall recover our own.'

'I don't follow you,' said Nikko. 'What can my gift —— ?'

'It is something more than that. Nor can we regard it as a gift. Many thousands of pounds have been spent in your name, in return for which, when the moment comes, stock to that value will be issued to you in the Sciriel Restoration Fund.'

Fear that the privations of the last few months had unsettled the brain of the old statesman-soldier made Nikko hesitate to reply.

'In your letter, Lord Cheyne, you did not specify the manner of the relief to which this sum was to be devoted.'

'You were short of food,' said Nikko, 'and ——'

'True,' said the Duke, with eyes ablaze, 'but greater than our hunger for food was the hunger for justice— for honour — and for freeing our country from a vile and barbarous oppression. Lord Cheyne, during the last week, with courage that should inspire an epic, rifles, machine-guns, and ammunition have been borne on men's shoulders across the snows and crags of these mountains.'

'But Monsieur le Duc?'

'Men have died up there and died gladly that the power may be given us to win back our own. Already we have an arsenal of two hundred rifles, ten machine-guns, and a hundred cases of ammunition, and to crown that achievement our beloved Queen is here to lead us on the march to victory.'

Nikko Cheyne came slowly to his feet and stared at the Duke.

'What you have told me,' he said, 'with the gallantry of ——' and then cut in on himself before a need of greater urgency. 'But, Monsieur le Duc, you cannot be serious when you speak of carrying the war into the enemy's country?'

A proud smile illuminated the old soldier's face.

'Something more than serious,' said he. 'The astonishment you have shown will be small to the astonishment of Foscani when we enter Djevo.'

Before the hopelessness and folly of such a step, a sudden fury possessed Nikko.

'Is this your love for the Queen,' he cried, 'that you lead her like a sheep to the slaughter?'

'Lord Cheyne!'

'Have you gone mad to think that with a handful of sick men — and these few weapons there is a hope of victory?'

The Duke's brows came down straight and hard.

'I do not think,' he said, 'you understand our spirit.'

Nikko struck the table with his fist.

'Spirit! Spirit! What man has better cause to understand it than I? But spirit alone cannot stand before artillery, mitrailleuse, and five thousand fattened and trained troops who are only waiting for the marsh to harden to turn Plesna into shambles. Not a week ago I was at Issoi and I saw that army in being. To-day I have seen these men of yours.' His hands made a despairing gesture. 'I know something of war and of soldiers. A man's spirit may be brave as a lion's, but if his stomach is empty he cannot fight. Here in Plesna, with the forest for cover and machine-guns on the river-banks, you may hold off Foscani's Rifles for half a year and, maybe, dictate terms, for beneath the surface the whole country is fermenting. But if you march this half-starved force into the open, you will lose them to a

man.' He stopped and looked about from side to side as though seeking an ally, someone to back up his words, but the lean faces of the officers at the table were lined only with resentment and contempt.

'Lord Cheyne,' said the Duke, picking his words and giving to each the final grain of emphasis, 'we do not forget our obligation to you nor the obligation that is due to our honour as Sciriens. At the earliest moment it is safe for a large body of men to cross the marsh, we shall do so and march on Djevo. It may be God's will that we shall fail, but it is our will to make the attempt. Against that will neither argument nor fear of death will prevail. I have spoken with the Queen and have been given her orders.'

But only one word in ten reached Nikko's ears. With shut fists pressed to his eyes he sought to drive away a vision that second by second shaped in his brain. Foscani's Rifles, with their vulpine faces closing in an ever-tightening circle about Bettany and her poor gallant followers. And then the end of a cause and of a spirit — of romance and of adventure. The beacon, flaring for a little hour of fanatical fervour, stamped into ashes.

'Gentlemen,' he pleaded, and his voice was dead with pain, 'wait a little longer. Hold on here another month until more machine-guns and small arms can be brought over the mountains. Give yourselves a chance.'

'I hoped I had made myself clear,' said the Duke. 'You drive me to say it is not for you, a stranger, to presume to suggest a policy.'

And from the other officers came a low murmur of assent.

One remarked:

'I have heard it said that there is little chivalry left in Europe outside of Sciriel.'

Nikko swung round on him:

'Suicide is not chivalry.'

'Nor,' said the old Duke, 'is chivalry a quality that looks for certain reward.'

The doors were opened, an orderly entered and saluted.

'The sounders, *mon général*,' said he, 'the mud sounders are here.'

'Let them come in.'

Entered then six men, ragged men, grey as dust, who carried long steel rods in their hands.

'Your report,' the Duke demanded.

A spokesman stepped forward.

'The prisoners of Plevi, seven hundred strong, are crossing the marsh.'

'Crossing the marsh?' the Duke repeated incredulously.

The spokesman nodded and a queer light gleamed in his eyes.

'The mud has hardened, *mon général*. The marsh holds.'

Round the schoolroom, like an echo of the past when children repeated the lesson of their teachers, ran an awed whisper.

'The marsh holds! The marsh holds!'

The Duke of Svorzo turned exultantly to his captains.

'Your companies will be ready to march at dawn tomorrow.'

10

In Plesna that night spirits were at fever heat. Wine was issued, a very little wine, for in the whole settlement there was not enough to give to each man a third of a bottle. But so many months had passed since any-

thing but water had been tasted that this little ran like fire through their veins and made talk brave.

Everywhere groups and knots of men, their eyes alight, their hands electrical with gesture, gathered in the streets and open places of the little village. Some boasted fiercely of what they meant to do, others engaged in bouts of sword play — sham but desperate duels.

Sharp rang the cry with thrust: 'So we fight in Sciriel.'

Like the buzzing of angry bees buzzed threats and promises of justice and retribution.

'Foscani shall swing at the palace gates.'

'I myself will tie the knot.'

'No, I.'

And senseless arguments springing from the cause as to whose right was the better.

'Within a week the Queen shall reign in Djevo.'

'A week! Three days.'

Then quieter men:

'It will be strange to see a woman again.'

'H'm! or children. It is a year since I saw a child.'

'My two were killed by the Rifles,' said the lifeless voice. 'Looking down from a window they were without understanding. In the spring we used to come to Plesna to gather wood anenomes.'

'It was always a forest of flowers.'

'It shall prove a forest of thorns,' said the man whose children were dead. And thrice he drove his sword point into the empty air.

A boy poet had strung together a war song and was dinning it into the heads of a score of listeners: 'So it goes — so it goes' — until the foolish vaunting verses were half-learnt, remembered, and came crashing out in chorus.

They marched round the village singing it — the little band swelling to a great company.

> 'We fight to live, yet do not fear to die
> Natalie, oh Natalie——'

Louder, louder they sang.

And Natalie came to the doorway of a cottage and held out her arms to them.

'My dear, dear people,' she said and choked and could say no more.

Many of the prisoners from Plevi were lost to the uses of speech. They were like empty shells strewn upon a beach. Mere husks of men frightened at the size of freedom, their eyes filled with the terror of open spaces.

An officer tried to persuade an old man, who lolled like one dead against a wall, to go to sleep.

'To-morrow you will need your strength, *père*, get what sleep you can.'

But the old man shook his head stupidly and muttered:

'How sleep? There is none to lock me in for the night.'

Others, whimpering like lost children, searched for their chain mates. Unfettered they were lonely and afraid. These walked with their hands curiously held, as though drawn apart by an invisible magnetism.

To any who addressed them they replied:

'We shall be ready at the fighting — but — but ——' or laughed senselessly.

Many knew not friends from enemies and drew back their lips wolfishly.

In a great voice someone cried:

'Griond — Griond — Griond!'

'Who is this Griond?' was asked.

'The man on my left — Griond — where are you? The link has broken — Griond!'

Screaming in fright he ran wildly down the street.

In the market-place with legs astride the low wall of a cattle pen sat Nikko Cheyne. All about him was a surge of unbalanced patriotism and of terror. Very much alone he felt — alone in his sanity in this place of false hopes. There was beauty in it — love of country — an idea — an inspiration; but the whole fabric was woven of perishable stuff — of spirit without strength.

Over and over in his brain recurred a phrase of Foscani's that Bettany had repeated to him as they rode through the night:

'Verily the wrath of the sheep is terrible.'

The wrath of the sheep — it fitted with such poignant aptness. But no earthly power would dissuade those gallant sheep from carrying that wrath to its ultimate doom and extinction.

Down the narrow street and across the market-place came the boy poet and his followers, chorusing their song of victory as though the laurels were already on their brows.

Nikko stuffed thumbs into his ears to shut out the sounds.

Fools, utter fools! Yet so lovable in their folly.

Someone touched his arm and he turned.

'The Queen has asked for you, Monsieur.'

'Very well.'

Nikko followed.

Presently he was in a cottage kitchen — candle-lit. There was a rough table, two stools, and Bettany, who stood beside the open window. As he came in she closed it, drew across a rag of curtain, and turned her face to his.

'Nikko!'

'Madam.'

She motioned the man who had brought him to retire. He saluted and shut the door.

'Why do you call me that, Nikko?'

'You are a Queen ——' and added almost bitterly, 'for a little while.'

'It was your love,' she answered, 'that has made me so.'

He shook his head.

'My love, my folly — your spirit, Bettany.'

She put a hand in one of his.

'Be kind,' she said. 'Don't spoil this wonder for me.'

Then:

'Bettany,' he cried, 'I hadn't realised or, by God, I would have carried you across the frontier by force — instead of — instead of ——'

'Instead of being so much braver than that, Nikko. But there would have been no need of force. I should have gone with you across the frontier if you would have let me go.'

'Your heart was with these people,' he answered desperately. 'I have known that ever since I came to Sciriel.'

'You are wrong, Nikko. My spirit was theirs, but my heart was yours — is yours — now and always. If you had wanted me to come I shouldn't have refused — couldn't have — Sciriel spoilt your life once.'

'That's not true. My life is Sciriel, since Sciriel and you are one.'

'You waited seven years.'

'It wasn't long, Bettany.'

'Seven years — for nothing.'

'No. For everything.'

'I feel a cheat, Nikko — such a cheat.' And it was like a child confessing to a fault.

'Bettany.'

'No, let me go on. A cheat — because — all this — out there — the singing, the believing — can only end in nothing. I've cheated you of me — and now I shall cheat them, for because of me they will try and will fail. It'll all be a waste, Nikko — a moment of pride and then — waste.'

Nikko's throat hurt.

'Without that pride — there could have been no happiness.'

She shut her eyes and nodded.

'I suppose — and yet — you and I ——' she stretched her arms above her head. 'I'm two people — two — and they are so different. But, oh, it seems such a pity!'

'It can't be helped,' he said.

She rubbed her forehead.

'Perhaps we'll say good-bye now. Good-bye to Nikko and Bettany. Those two may not meet again — unless' — a curious light came into her eyes — 'in some other place — soon.'

Like a madman he crushed her in his arms and smothered her face with kisses.

'Good-bye — my dearest — my dearest ——' Then let her go — pushed her from him almost rudely and cried, 'One of us perhaps — not both. Me — not you.'

Then she was alone with the sound of his feet racing down the street.

Nikko Cheyne saddled his horse, mounted and rode through the forest of Plesna.

At the ford he was stopped by an armed sentry.

'None leaves Plesna to-night.'

'Stand aside.'

From the shadow of a wattle hut came four figures. The Duke of Svorzo looked up at Nikko.

'You?' he said.

'Tell this man to drop my bridle.'

'Where are you going?'

'On my own affairs.'

The Duke stroked his chin thoughtfully. At last:

'Some men, even when their bellies are full, have no stomach for fighting. As a foreigner, sir, you are at liberty to go. Let him pass.'

Ten minutes later, the hoofs of Nikko's horse were drumming like thunder over the crust of hollow mud that coated the marsh.

II

FOSCANI'S orders were precise. No word of the outbreak at Plevi Prison was to be circulated in Djevo. On his arrival at the headquarters of the D.S.N. he had summoned his colleagues from their beds. When they were gathered in the committee room which once had been the grand dining-hall of the palace, he told them what had taken place.

The recital was barely finished when telephone messages began to arrive from outlying police posts in the neighbourhood of Svorzo.

'Seven hundred men marching toward Plesna.'

Upon the faces of many to whom that message was read was a look of consternation; but Foscani was unmoved.

'What could be better?' he said. 'If the fools had marched to the Solji Pass they could have overcome the frontier guard with ease. Instead, they re-deliver themselves into the hands of justice.'

'But still, seven hundred desperate men ——' grumbled a weedy-bearded counsellor, endeavouring to remove between his lower teeth dirt from his finger-nails.

Foscani rapped the table with the point of his thumb and smiled.

'Will not occupy my Rifles seven hundred minutes to overcome.'

'Look you here, Foscani.' The speaker was a loosely built giant with a shag of unbrushed hair that fell in a valance before his eyes and made him look like a Yorkshire terrier. 'No good saying I like this business, for I do not. Who gave the order for the King to be killed?'

Foscani's eyes glittered dangerously.

'My body-guard have instructions to protect me, Mordo.'

'H'm!' Mordo grunted, and again, 'H'm! Protection can be had at too high a price.'

A hiss of amazement escaped from Foscani. This was the first symptom of criticism or insubordination any had dared to show him.

'So!' said he. 'Sso!'

'Those men would not have broken prison, save under a great provocation.'

Foscani repeated:

'Sso!'

'I ask you, brothers,' said Mordo, 'to look at this broadly. I say the affair is a blow against the prestige of the revolution.'

But although here and there an eyelid flickered a message of sympathy and agreement, none was bold enough to put feelings into words.

'And further I say that the murder of the King may have ill and far-reaching results. Already there is too much disaffection and this is no time to stir up more of it.'

'Mordo,' said Foscani, 'I do not like men at this table who suffer from nerves. I have no use for such men here or elsewhere.'

'Foscani!' Mordo was white with anger. 'Foscani, I represent the Department of the East.'

'Yes, by my instructions,' Foscani intercalated, 'instructions that I may cancel at my pleasure.' Then with his softest smile: 'Go back to bed, Mordo, the hair is over your eyes to-night.'

Mordo rose from the table.

'I warn you,' he said and held out a quivering finger, 'I warn you not to go too far. Liberty is one thing — and executions in the name of Liberty — but murder — murder is another ——'

'Must I repeat my order?' Foscani asked. 'Must I take steps to see that it is obeyed?'

Someone touched Mordo on the sleeve.

'Go, comrade.'

With lips clamped together the giant marched from the room.

'Yess,' said Foscani, and there was a long silence.

'A pity,' a voice grumbled.

Another said:

'Much is unavoidable in the cause of Freedom.'

Foscani rose.

'This matter,' said he, 'is neither to be spoken of nor published. To-morrow I shall call at the Elysées Gardens and inform the girl Montressor. In the meantime the telephone to her house is not to be used.'

But forbidden news travels fastest, and through a dozen unknown channels ran a rumour of the revolt at Plevi. Thus, less than sixteen hours after the blowing-up of the prison the citizens of Djevo were whispering in knots at street corners. Fantastic tales were circulated of the night march of the freed captives. A story went round that they had fired the Forest of Svorzo — sacked villages and pillaged towns. Next came something more than a rumour — a statement overheard from one of Foscani's body-guard, who, having drunk himself into that state in which men are given to in-

judicious confidence, blurted out the whole story with a wealth of blood-curdling detail.

'Ripped from stomach to chin — stomach to chin. And the Liberator's car with a string of the devils sprawling on either side. Faces rubbed off against the cobbles — saw it! my own eyes ——'

In an hour the tale was all over the city.

The King murdered by Foscani's orders.

With the spreading of the news were planted seeds of anger — horror and dismay: the same seeds, though less swift to take root, that had inspired the sudden revolt of the prisoners.

An old man who had harmed no one, done to death barbarously. A fine old man as many remembered with regret. Natalie's father. And this was freedom.

A number of citizens, decent middle-class men, formed themselves into a procession and marched to the palace to demand an authentic statement of the affair. They were met at the gates of the palace yard by a cordon of the civil guards and ordered to disperse at once or be fired upon.

'As loyal subjects of Sciriel we demand the truth,' said a spokesman.

His answer was the clatter of breech blocks. The procession took the hint and moved away with low grumblings of protest. Choosing a quiet square, they held an indignation meeting to which many hundreds were drawn.

But very few speakers had delivered themselves of utterance before posses of mounted police rode into the square and began to clear it with whips.

Powerless to resist, the malcontents were driven away like bits of paper before a wind.

At eleven o'clock Foscani with an escort of three times its usual strength was driven to the Elysées

Gardens. In some of the thoroughfares through which he passed he was openly hissed and scarce a man lifted his hat or saluted. A bucket full of dirty water was thrown from an upstairs window of a tenement house, some of it splashing the Liberator's car and the Liberator himself.

But Foscani might have been carved out of marble for all the notice he took. His eyes with their half-lowered lids may have been clouded with more than their usual coldness — but his smile was fixed and changeless.

Before the house where Natalie had been held prisoner, the car and cavalcade drew up. Groups of townsfolk, drawn to the spot by that curious form of sympathy that finds expression in standing before a house in which a tragedy has been enacted, backed to a distance at the approach of Foscani.

As he alighted from the car he looked to right and left.

'Why is there no sentry?' he said, and without waiting for an answer, walked up the steps and entered the house.

In the hall he looked about him perplexed.

'Guard!'

There was no reply.

He threw open a door and saw six dead men sprawling over a table. Flies rose lazily from a pool of coagulated blood.

Outside a voice cried:

'There's a dead body in the bushes here.'

Some of the townsfolk drew nearer to peep through the railings at the corpse of the sentry.

Foscani mounted the stairs and entered another room.

Lolling in the corner, chin on breast, as though asleep, was the officer of the guard.

Foscani touched him and the officer toppled sideways, stiff as a doll. The white shirt parting showed a rapier wound over the heart.

Up the next two flights went Foscani, to pass from one empty room to another.

His face when he reached the hall downstairs was whiter than formerly.

'She appears to have escaped,' he said.

One of the guard on the steps heard the news and cried it to his fellows in the streets.

Then, for the first time, Foscani's composure was shattered. With the back of his hand he struck the offender three times across the mouth.

But the townsfolk had heard, and a murmur of amazement went up from them — a murmur that turned to a low growl of hatred as Foscani came down the steps and entered the car. Then someone cheered.

'Use your whips,' Foscani ordered.

Thus tidings of the escape of Natalie were speeded by whips through the streets of Djevo. And with those tidings an ember was fanned into a spark and a flame flickered.

For the rest of that day mounted police patrolled the city and wherever men were found in talk together the whip thongs cracked.

'Best bring down a company of the Rifles,' they said at the D.S.N.

But Foscani shook his head.

'Let them simmer,' he said. 'Let the little fires burn. When my Rifles come to Djevo, it shall be remembered.'

Late that evening came news by wire that the prisoners of Plevi had crossed the marsh into Plesna.

Foscani read the message aloud at an extraordinary meeting of the committee.

'*Over* the marsh,' one repeated. '*Over!* But that can only mean ——'

'That the weather has been singularly clement of late,' said Foscani. 'In, let us say, two days from now, we will turn our attention to Plesna.'

12

At ten o'clock next morning, Nikko Cheyne, his uniform covered with dust and mud, his face grey with fatigue, rode into Djevo. As he rode alone some civilians at a corner cursed him openly and in another street he was pelted with bits of plaster and tins. Wondering, dully, what had altered the temper of the crowd, he urged the tired horse to a trot and kept to the main thoroughfares until he had reached Mekla's house. Leaving the horse in the garden, he entered, washed, changed into civilian clothes, and went with all speed to The House of Friends.

About here was quiet, for not half an hour before the patrols had cleared that quarter and in evidence of their efficiency Nikko passed by three corpses lying neglected.

At The House of Friends was Vilasto, who looked at Nikko as at a ghost.

'Cheyne — Cheyne — what — why?'

Nikko offered the briefest explanation.

'And Natalie?'

'She is at Plesna.'

'Plesna?'

Nikko nodded.

Baron Vilasto opened and shut his hands like a man seeking to control unendurable pain. Then:

'I understand —— And it is where she belongs.'

'I — we saw that. It couldn't be helped.'

'But you — you should have stayed with her.'

Nikko shook his head.

'By noon to-day Plesna will be evacuated. The Duke has given orders to his men to march on Djevo.'

Baron Vilasto covered his eyes with his frail transparent hands.

'That will be the end,' he said, 'as I foretold — only sooner. But one can understand and it is a gallant end.' Then angrily repeated, 'You should have stayed with her.'

Nikko's face was like stone. He answered:

'I am not easily afraid — but of that I was afraid. Love makes one terrified. I've said good-bye to her, Baron, because whatever happens — I'm not likely to see her again.'

'Will any of us?'

'I don't know — it might be — if only —— There's a plan in my head and about a million to one against its working. But I'm going to try. If you meet, tell her I was having a try.' He sat for a moment pressing his fingers tightly to his head. 'I'm so damned tired, can't think properly. Tell me, is there an electric power plant working in this town — where one could tap a current?'

Vilasto looked at him in half-pity.

'Get some sleep.'

Nikko turned irritably.

'But I want to know.'

Vilasto shrugged his shoulders.

'The power house that supplies the palace and the searchlights in Djevo Pass is working still.'

Nikko stumbled to his feet.

'Those searchlights? You are sure?'

Vilasto pointed to the grating window.

'There it is, yonder.'

Crossing the cellar, Nikko peered between the narrow

bars into the gorge. A hundred yards eastward the gorge curved and at the edge of one steep side was a low building with an iron chimney in the roof exhausting successive puffs of white smoke. From a port on the ground level, loose power cables spanned the gorge to an anchorage on the opposite side. From there, borne on a series of iron brackets, they ran upstream.

With what seemed to Vilasto senseless interest, Nikko stood staring at the cables, rapping his teeth with a finger-nail. Then, shaking himself like a dog, he came to life and said: 'I'm going now.' He walked to the door of the cellar, stopped, stood again, and went out without a word.

There was a workshop at The House of Friends, where for ten minutes Nikko rummaged in a heap of junk, presently emerging with a pair of pliers, a length of rope, and a long coil of flexible insulated wire. The latter he wrapped in an old piece of cloth, since it was too big for any pocket. The rope he wound about his body like a belt.

Following the street that ran parallel with the river, he came to a spot where the garden of a deserted house offered a clear view up and down the gorge. Lying flat on his face on the outside wall, Nikko peered down. Fifteen feet below ran the cables from the power house. Lit by the morning sun he could follow their course right up to the palace gardens, a quarter of a mile farther on. At this point they became indistinguishable from a great number of other lines, the coloured insulators of which showed up like spots of paint on a grey canvas.

'I must reach there somehow,' he said to himself.

At the gates of the palace he was stopped by a sentry, who demanded his business.

'I am making a portrait of the Liberator.'

'But my orders ——'

Nikko produced his pass.

'Best let me through.'

'Seems all right,' said the sentry, 'but if I were you, comrade, I wouldn't choose this day to spend in that company.'

Nikko made no reply, but crossing the palace yard mounted the great stone steps. Before mingling with the crowds who thronged the atrium he stuffed the coil of wire into his fur cap.

Among the sea of faces he caught sight of Simon and beckoned. 'Can I go through?'

Simon, his face white from a morning's work that had sapped most of his energy and all his patience, snapped an angry negative.

'Very well,' said Nikko, with a yawn; 'I'll loaf in the gardens until he's ready to see me.'

'He'll not be ready to see you now or later. You must have little sense to expect it.'

'I'll wait in the garden,' said Nikko again. 'Best to tell him I am waiting in the garden.'

Simon was turning irritably aside when Nikko caught him by the sleeve.

'Tell the sentries to let me pass, Simon.'

'Haven't I enough to do without ——?'

But as they were near the French windows that opened upon the grounds at the back, and as Nikko showed no disposition to release his hold, Simon took the line of least resistance and rapped out the necessary order to the man on guard.

Nikko passed out into the sunlight and sat on the stone coping of a fountain, stirring the quiet surface of the water to ripples with a lazy forefinger. Presently he rose, stretched himself, and moved a little nearer to the gorge, passing the window of Foscani's room *en*

route. As he passed, Nikko had a glimpse of Foscani's back and the faces of a number of men. The sentry on duty at that point, who was acquainted with Nikko, made a warning gesture. Nikko nodded responsively and wandered, counting his footsteps as he walked, to the railings that fringed the gorge.

Here he stayed for several minutes looking down in idle contemplation. Ten feet below and only a few yards from where he stood the power cable entered the palace by a pipe. The telephone wires carried by the coloured insulators ran not more than two feet above the cable. Nikko moved down until he was standing immediately above where the lines converged. Here a summer-house screened him from view.

In that summer-house Nikko spent ten busy minutes with lengths of flexible wire, the pliers, and a pocket knife. Then, uncoiling the rope from his waist, he tied a loop in it, big enough to pass over his shoulders. The other half, after exactly measuring the position of the knot, he made fast to one of the iron stanchions of the railing. In broad daylight with hundreds of men not a stone's throw away, the task before him courted almost certain disaster; but Nikko did not give a thought to that. The events of the last few days had robbed him of all sense of personal danger. Ever since he had ridden from Plesna with the Duke's gibe ringing in his ears, his emotions had become numbed. There was a certain thing he had set himself to do — or die in the attempt. Beyond that point imagination had ceased to work.

Trusting to the summer-house and to luck that no one would see him, Nikko scrambled through the railings and lowered himself hand over hand into the abyss. Supported by the loop and dangling over a drop of three hundred feet, he got to work.

The strain of the cord about his chest was unbearable, but he took no count of that until his task was completed. Pain was a stimulus. Without haste he cut one of the two telephone lines with his pliers and fastened leads from the main coil of flexible wire which he had brought to the severed ends. That was simple, a mere question of twisting them together. Less simple was the business of splitting apart the tarry power cable and carrying a positive and negative current from that to the telephone line.

'Must make a good contact,' he kept muttering.

His lungs were bursting. Then came the thought:

'Suppose I haven't enough strength to haul myself up?'

He worked on — dizzily.

'Now for the test.'

With a short strand of wire, cut for the purpose, he shorted the telephone lines. Blue sparks crackled and fizzed.

'Works,' said Nikko, set his teeth, hauled himself up, wriggled through the railings, and lay gasping.

Everything was black for a while as though night had come. It seemed to Nikko that only by sheer will he forced the daylight to return. Carrying the coil of wire, he stumbled rather than walked across the gravel path into the summer-house. Arrived there, he measured up and recoiled the wire and tied it neatly with a bit of string. After flashing a spark from the two stripped ends to satisfy himself beyond doubt that the circuit was in order — he spread them wide apart, winding them in opposite directions along a twig. Then with a glance to right and left to be sure none were watching, he lowered the coil a few feet down the side of the precipice and left it hanging from the string.

So far he had succeeded, but the success compared

with the tremendous adventure that still awaited him inspired no particular satisfaction.

This was the least part of the business — a mere overture.

Nikko Cheyne smoothed the creases from his coat and drifted across the lawn before the windows of Foscani's room. Save for Foscani, the room was empty now. Foscani sat at his table, staring into the garden.

Seeing Nikko, he beckoned with a crooked finger. As Nikko approached, the sentry, whose back was to the room, dropped a hand on the butt of his revolver, but in response to an order from his master stood aside to let Nikko enter.

The two men faced one another in silence. It was broken by Foscani.

'I have been wondering where you were,' said he. 'You have not been in Djevo the last few days.'

'To judge by my reception when I returned this morning, I might have been wiser to keep away altogether.'

'You noticed a difference, Cheyne?'

'A few more dead men and some rumblings of complaint.'

Foscani nodded.

'Soon,' he said, 'those who complain shall be given cause.' Then, 'Where have you been, Cheyne?'

Nikko gave a half-smile, but said nothing.

'Where have you been?'

'Out of bounds,' was the brazen reply.

'Explain.'

'To Plesna.'

'Is that a joke?'

'A joke or a tragedy — the definition rests with Your — Mightiness.'

Foscani's voice became very thin.

'So you went to Plesna — I see.'

'To the marsh.'

'You had not read the order dealing with Plesna?'

'Often. But what use is your friendship, Foscani, unless I enjoy privileges?'

The answer pleased and Nikko was swift to follow up his advantage.

'I returned in hope of exacting another privilege.'

'Yess!'

'Leave to revisit the *polji* of Issoi.'

'For what purpose?'

Nikko humped his shoulders.

'Interest, experience. To see your war dogs mobilise.'

'Sit here in the light,' said Foscani. 'I want to look at you, Cheyne.'

But Nikko shook his head.

'If I sit I shall fall asleep. I'm bone tired.'

'Sit down.'

There was no refusing to obey the tone in which the command was spoken.

Nikko screwed up his face — sat — stretched his legs and yawned.

'How do you know the Rifles are to mobilise? H'm!'

'Common sense — reason. Yesterday I saw a great rabble cross the marsh. If the mud was dry enough to support that weight — it will support your fellows.'

Foscani leaned back in his chair watching and thinking.

'Yes,' he nodded. 'Yes, you are right. But there will be no need for my Rifles to make that crossing, Cheyne. A little after dawn this morning the Duke of Svorzo and his men marched from Plesna.'

'Poor sheep,' said Nikko, and nodded drowsily.

The telephone bell on Foscani's table whirred. He picked up the receiver and listened.

'I see,' he said, then — 'No. My orders are that there is to be no opposition — none. Yes, I will hold.' While waiting he smiled at Nikko. 'The Duke has occupied the market town of Kutlib. The gentlemen have marched well. They are in a hurry.'

The voice on the telephone wire had begun to speak again. Foscani's face underwent a swift change.

'Are you certain of this?'

He listened a moment, then rang off and sat chewing his lips and tapping the table-top with a finger-nail. At last he said aloud:

'It does not matter.'

'Something has gone wrong?'

Foscani's answer was like a cat spitting.

'Nothing. What should? The fools march and she is at their head. Let them march. Let them collect confidence and followers *en route*. Let them march into the streets of Djevo and find their reward waiting for them — here. They shall not be disappointed. As the Queen enters by the West Gate — my Rifles shall enter by the East. And then ——' He laid his hands flat upon the table and his eyes burned with the fierce light of insanity. 'There are no half measures in government. Have you ever seen a killing, Cheyne — a massacre — a stamping-out? There is a peace comes after it that passes all understanding. You shall have a window for that event, I promise, and later shall look down into the gorge and see a thousand corpses.'

Nikko did not trust himself to speak for several seconds. At last:

'I can imagine it, Foscani — for the last two days when I shut my eyes that picture was constantly before them.'

Slowly Foscani's composure returned and his breathing became normal. Picking up a pencil, he made some rapid calculations on a scrap of paper.

'Allowing for rests, they should be at the city gate by noon to-morrow. But, no, enthusiasm never rests, they will march until they drop. By dawn then — dawn at the earliest. Dead beat they will be, if I know human nature. From 3 A.M. the Rifles shall be standing by ready to move off.'

He pressed a bell and Simon came in.

'Issue a circular call ordering the withdrawal of all district police posts between Kutlib and the capital. They will camp for the night in the palace yard. Repeat those instructions.'

Simon repeated each word like a parrot and went to obey the order.

'When my Rifles have tasted blood, they are apt to become unruly. It is as well on these occasions to have a few disciplined troops at hand.'

Once again he touched the bell and once again Simon came in.

'All the women at Issoi to be sent down to Djevo within the next three hours.'

'I will see to that.'

'The ration train to Issoi to-night to be cancelled. No transport or details of any kind to move up the pass. The road is to be kept clear for the movement down of troops.'

'I will see to that.'

'Repeat the instructions.'

Minutely the instructions were repeated and Simon moved to the door.

'Wait. A cordon of mounted police to be drawn across the pass at this end with orders to shoot anyone who approaches within fifty yards.'

Nikko Cheyne bit his lip.

'— who approaches within fifty yards,' Simon echoed.

'And now get me headquarters on this line.'

Simon retired and Foscani waited in silence for the telephone to ring.

'And my pass to Issoi?' said Nikko.

Foscani looked up with cold eyes.

'You heard my orders.'

'Certainly, but ——'

'There are no exceptions to those orders.'

'But I have a reason ——'

Foscani rose and made a gesture toward the door.

'You have occupied too much of my time already.'

'You refuse to let me go?'

'To Issoi, yes, but from this room you have my full permission.'

Nikko moved slowly to the door, then turned and in his eyes a challenge was blazing.

'I thought,' he said, 'we understood one another.'

'We may yet,' said Foscani, with an odd emphasis.

And Nikko echoed.

'We may yet.'

The door closed and Foscani stood looking at it through half-shut eyes, in which a sudden intention had appeared.

'Simon,' he cried, but there was no answer.

The telephone bell rang imperatively and for the next ten minutes he volleyed orders into the mouthpiece. When he had finished, he touched the bell push. Of Simon who answered the summons he asked:

'Has the Englishman Cheyne gone?'

'He passed through the anteroom the best part of a quarter of an hour ago.'

'Did he? So! The next thing for you to do is to have him arrested, Simon.'

'On what charge?'

'Suspicion.'

'I will see to that,' said Simon.

'And tell my man to bring me a basin of warm milk.'

'— of warm milk,' the rat-like Simon repeated.

Foscani folded his white hands over his breast and went to sleep.

But when three of the civil guard searched Mekla's house for the Englishman, Nicholas Cheyne, they found only a little old woman who was frightened and a member of the mounted police in a dirty mud-splashed uniform, who was so drunk that it was impossible to extract from him a sensible answer of any kind.

With a bottle in one hand and a cup in the other he sang a song made famous by the warriors of many nations.

'Inky-pinky parlez-vous —— PARLEZ-VOUS'

The refrain echoed in their ears as they left the house to search elsewhere.

13

TOWARD dusk squadrons of mounted police began to arrive at Djevo from the outlying districts. Fully three hundred clattered up the main boulevard and were admitted into the palace yard. With this company rode Nikko Cheyne. Some of these men had actually seen the force from Plesna on the march and were complaining bitterly that they had not been allowed the pleasure of a little skirmishing.

'We could have sliced up a few score, comrade, as easy as drink a bottle.'

'How far distant was this?' Nikko queried.

'Twelve to fifteen miles — not more.'

'They halted for two hours in Boudon's vineyard, south of Scheza,' said another, 'and were on the march again by four o'clock. Nor did they march badly for men in such condition.'

A thick-voiced Lett broke in.

'Some of our fellows from Kutlib polished off a few stragglers in a wood.' He winked. 'But that was before the Liberator's orders.'

A laugh greeted the recital of the gallant exploit.

Under the plane trees in the great square before the palace, Nikko drew apart from these men's company and urged his horse to a canter. Making a wide half-circle round the palace he struck the road about half a mile below the entrance to the pass.

From the ground a gentle mist was rising which obscured all objects at a distance of a hundred yards. Down in the gorge on his right the waters of the river murmured luxuriously. The gorge in this part was no more than fifty feet deep and, as he vividly remembered, at the entrance to the pass was even less. Still farther on, river and road were level.

Nikko continued to ride until, ahead of him, he heard the jingle of bits and the low growl of men's voices.

This was the police cordon, mounted by Foscani's orders to protect the road.

Hereabouts, so far as Nikko could remember, a ruined cottage stood, from the back of which a narrow diagonal path — a mere sheep track — slanted to the water.

Nikko dismounted and walked his horse on a strip of grass at the roadside until the jagged outlines of the cottage loomed through the mist.

Viewed from above the path to the river bed looked far from encouraging, and his horse, an intelligent beast, refused. Nikko whispered coaxingly, but to no avail.

'If you won't be led down, you'll be ridden down,' said Nikko, and swung into the saddle.

The argument which followed was silent but determined, and ended in favour of the rider.

A lurch — a slither, the rattle and splash of falling stones and a landing knee-deep in a pool.

As a result of the prolonged drought there was little enough water, but the bed of the river was a wilderness of fissured rocks, slag, and great round stones. Once again Nikko dismounted, and with the care of a nurse began to lead his horse over the perilous surface.

With his nerves taut, it seemed to Nikko that no matter how slowly and cautiously they proceeded the noise they made must be heard for miles. After a few minutes he saw the black jaws of the ravine rising upon either side of him at the spot where the cordon of police were posted.

The water clucked and chuckled derisively. His horse's hoofs clattered on the stones. From above came the sound of a laugh, and then — the agony of that moment was beyond expression — a match flared, was tossed in the air and fell with a hiss at Nikko's feet.

In a flash his pistol was in his hand and he checked breathlessly. A minute — two minutes passed, but no challenge came from the darkness overhead. Some fool had lit a cigarette, that was all.

Nikko Cheyne wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. 'Come on,' he whispered, and caressed the neck of his frightened horse.

Ten minutes later he was galloping up Djevo Pass as though the devil were behind him.

Two miles farther on Nikko reined in. Here the road angled sharply to the left and thence ran straight for the last three hundred yards to the entrance of the *polji* of Issoi. On the farther side of this angle, three hundred feet up on the cliff face the machine-gunners and the searchlights had their being.

Nikko had no need to remind himself of their location, for the searchlights were at work, their fan-shaped beams sweeping the road like a mighty broom.

Where he had halted his horse at the bend, Nikko was outside their effective range, but twenty yards farther on it would not be so. Twenty yards farther on death swift and sure awaited him.

If there had been mist in the pass he might have risked a blind gallop across the open, but with the coming of night a breeze had sprung up and the mist, which at the start had proved so good a friend, now had vanished.

Nikko drew a torch from his pocket and flashed it at the rock face. Above him were the lines of telephone wires with their coloured insulators and above them the power cable, looking like a black worm wriggling perpendicularly upward from the last of its parallel anchorages. The cable was out of reach, but by standing on his saddle and using the telephone wires as an improvised ladder, Nikko was just able to get the fingers of one hand about it. Then with his teeth and his other hand he wrenched the coils of the cable apart and cut through a single wire with his pliers.

The pass was plunged into darkness.

Dropping back into the saddle, Nikko drove in his spurs and rode as he had never ridden before. He knew that in darkness or light every inch of the road would be registered by the machine-gunners, and his one hope

was to make the entrance to the *polji* before they had recovered from their surprise. And he was right.

As horse and rider whirled through the gut of the *polji*, a hail of bullets drilled the dust-cloud raised by the flying hoofs.

'Satan's body, who's here?' cried a voice.

Stretching like a wall before him were the massed companies of Foscani's Rifles waiting for the signal to march.

With a shout of 'Despatches!' Nikko wheeled to the left and urged his horse through a park of field artillery and transport. A driver cut at him with a whip, but he rode on. Hands snatched at him, but he rode on. Men yelled to bid him to stop but he still rode.

'Despatches for headquarters!'

A platoon of men, sprawling in the dust, scrambled to their feet, cursed fluently, and gave him right of way.

Nikko rode on.

The camp had been struck. The entire personnel of the Rifles were crowded in a few acres before the mouth of the pass. After that dense, reeking wedge of humanity the desolation and loneliness of the eastern end of the *polji* was incredible. A scattering of men passed between the farmhouse headquarters and the waiting troops, but beyond headquarters not a living soul was to be seen.

Nikko checked his panting horse under the shadow of the dam and loosely tied the reins to the telegraph pole at which, only a few days before, the idea had first come to him.

From the saddle pockets he took the dynamite cartridges and fuses which he had taken from the barn at Plevi, then, reaching above his head, he caught the two trailing wires and began to work.

For three hours beneath the shadow of that great mass of poised water, alone and undisturbed and yet for all his anxiety as careful as a watchmaker, Nikko worked at and completed his task. That there should be no mistake, he examined and reëxamined every detail of the work — running his fingers over the wires, testing the contacts, and driving the tampings so tightly home that the broomstick he had brought with him bounded back from them as from a paving-stone.

When the job was finished and so far as was humanly possible nothing was left to do, he covered his eyes and said a prayer.

'Please God.'

From the far end of the *polji* a bugle blared — another and another. The silence was split with savage cheers.

14

BUGLES — words of command and cheering. The signal to march. Nikko stared at his watch. It was 2 A.M. An hour sooner than the earliest moment at which the signal was expected.

Foscani had said 3 A.M.

It was impossible that the force from Plesna was already at the gates of Djevo.

Even the deepest fervour — the wildest enthusiasm — the most devoted patriotism has a limit to its performance.

And yet the signal had been given, and already that savage horde of murderers would be pouring into the pass.

What hope, what chance had he to reach Djevo before them? Was he to fail Bettany for the second and the last time?

Once again Nikko was in the saddle, galloping

across the sun-baked arena with even greater fury than before.

Foscani's army was on its feet, wedging forward toward the gap. Nikko skirted the outer fringe, crushing men to one side as he rode. That he succeeded in reaching the mouth of the pass was a matter of luck rather than of determination.

Orders were booming to stand away and let the guns go through. A brigade of light field artillery rattled through the gap.

'Stand back for the guns!'

Voices screamed:

'Kiyah! let the knives go through!'

Nikko urged his horse into a solid block of cursing humanity. A bayonet was jabbed into his horse's flank. The enraged beast spun round, lashing out with heels and backing. The hoofs drummed against soft flesh and brittle bone, kicking an avenue toward the gap.

Screams, shrieks, and a pistol shot. A man drove at Nikko with a knife and reeled back with a broken wrist.

The horse tottered, grew rigid and coughed. Someone had stabbed from below.

Nikko dragged his legs clear of the press, stood for an instant on the saddle, and jumped over men's heads. He landed fair and square on a limber, swung clear, and raced on foot down the pass beside steaming horses and clanking artillery. The road before him was a solid mass of marching men for a hundred yards or more. To pass them Nikko slithered down to the river bed and leapt from rock to rock. Then came another battery of guns — six guns with limbers. Before them rode an officer and before him was the empty road.

At a long loping run Nikko passed the guns one by one until only the officer was ahead.

The road curved sharply and the officer was lost to view. Nikko rounded the curve like a shadow.

A sharp exclamation of surprise, a thud — a stifled cry — the officer's body fell with a splash into the river and Nikko was in the saddle.

As the first gun came round the bend, Nikko fired at point-blank range.

The near-side leader threw up his head and took the bullet intended for the driver, between the eyes.

The poor brute reared and fell, those behind, trying to bolt, stumbling and floundering over its body. Utter confusion followed. The offside wheel of the gun struck a projecting rock and the whole mass heeled over sideways.

A tangle of traces, metal, spinning wheels, and kicking horses.

The Pass of Djevo was blocked.

Encouraged by a few wild shots, Nikko Cheyne rode on alone. At the mouth of the pass the police cordon drew aside to let the rider go through.

As he flashed by, a coarse jest was cracked, and one cried: 'Here's eagerness for killing!'

Without slackening speed, Nikko rode through the eastern gate of Djevo, which gaped wide for the coming of the Rifles. Over his shoulder he shouted: 'They are at my heels, comrade.'

'And not a minute too soon,' was answered. 'The devils from Plesna are not a mile distant.'

But Nikko did not pause to listen. He wheeled his horse to the left and, stopping beside the palace wall, once more stood upon the saddle, gripped the spikes, and swung over into the garden. The riderless horse stretched out his long neck and began to graze peacefully.

It was not fear that caused Nikko's heart to hammer

so fiercely against his side, but the joy — the certainty of triumph. In five minutes — in ten — the balance of power would be in the Queen's favour. In his hands was the power to dictate terms. Dodging from tree to tree, crawling across open spaces on hands and knees, he reached the summer-house. Here were the railings that fringed the gorge and there the iron stanchion to which his coil of wire had been attached. As his fingers closed round it, Nikko breathed a prayer of thankfulness. Slipping the coil over his left arm and keeping the two naked ends of wire in his right hand along with his pistol, he crept toward the lighted window of Foscani's room. Like a black silhouette stood the sentry on duty.

Screened by a bed of standard roses, Nikko hesitated, indecisive whether to shoot now or make certain of the business by gaining a few yards. And while he hesitated, borne clear as a bell on the quiet air, came the sound of men's voices singing:

> 'We fight to live, yet do not fear to die,
> Natalie — oh, Natalie!'

The marching song of the boy poet of Plesna.

It rose, swelled, and died away to be answered by a crackle of musketry from the civil guard at the city gate. Then came another sound. The angry stutter of a machine-gun.

'Rat-tat-tat-tat — rat-tat-tat.'

Nikko threw up his head to listen.

'What is that — there are no machine-guns in Djevo!' The voice was Foscani's. 'Go and see.'

'Yes, master.'

The black silhouette at the window shouldered a rifle and came across the grass to where Nikko was crouching.

That he would be seen was inevitable, but Nikko waited until the last second before springing to his feet and striking. He had shifted the naked wires to his left hand and using the trigger guard of the pistol as a knuckle-duster, he struck with every ounce of strength at the man's jaw.

With only a breath of a sigh the sentry settled like melting wax to the grass and lay still.

Nikko picked up the rifle and walked across the lawn to the lighted room. As his foot rasped on the stone steps, came the question: 'What was it, Ivan?'

Nikko leaned the rifle against the wall, dropped the pistol into his pocket, and holding a naked end of the wire in either hand entered the room.

Foscani's back was to the window; he was in the act of taking the telephone receiver from its rest when Nikko spoke.

'Machine-guns, Foscani. Machine-guns of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Natalie of Sciriel.'

'Cheyne!'

Foscani put down the receiver, turned his head, and stared.

'You — I gave orders for you to be arrested,' he said.

'I didn't wait for them to be carried out. I had too much to do. But you will obey my orders, now, Foscani.'

'Where is the sentry?'

'Dead, I think — or nearly.'

Foscani's hand moved to the knob of a table drawer.

'Keep still,' Nikko's voice was sharp as a pistol shot. 'D'you think I'm such a fool as to come here without a better weapon than that?'

Foscani made an airy gesture.

'You must, I fear, have lost your reason, Cheyne, to come dressed up like a mountebank on a night like this. Go away. I am too busy to talk to you now.'

'There's nothing for you to say,' Nikko replied. 'I shall do what talking is necessary. Pick up that telephone and issue instructions for the immediate withdrawal of your Rifles to the *polji*.'

'But my Rifles are coming to Djevo, Cheyne. I am afraid they would never consent to turn back.'

'There is still time to do what I ask, Foscani.'

There was no doubt in Foscani's mind that he was in the presence of a lunatic — but lunatics are dangerous folks and he meant to take no risks.

'But why ask such a favour?'

'Because I have it in my mind that Natalie and her followers shall enter this city with as little opposition as possible.'

'We are agreed,' was the answer. 'Practically there will be no opposition *until* they have entered.'

'Foscani,' said Nikko in a low voice, 'you see these two wires. I have only to make these points meet and the great dam of Sarsanova will split like a dropped glass.'

The Liberator of Sciriel leaned forward and his eyes bulged. The point of his tongue shot out and ran to and fro over his scarlet lips.

'It's a lie,' he said softly, 'a lie.'

'Shall I prove whether it is a lie?'

'But you — but no one has reached Issoi. It's a lie.'

'Did you have a message to-night about the power lines to the searchlights being cut?'

Foscani started violently. 'You!'

Nikko nodded. 'Among other things.'

'Tss!' the breath escaped from Foscani's lungs as from a punctured tyre. With the finger-nails of both

hands he scratched his forehead, leaving a track of red weals. 'Even so,' he muttered, 'even so.' Then with sudden fierceness, 'Why — why — what is this business to you?'

'Something infinitely more than life,' was the answer.

Foscani grunted, stared, and understood.

'It was you who brought about the escape of the Queen?'

'Yes — and supplied Plesna with enough rifles and machine-guns to sweep the defences of Djevo into the rubbish heap.'

Foscani's head moved from side to side impotently. Time — he must have time — he must play for time. He began to move in short steps to and fro across the floor.

'I must think ——' he said. 'I must think.'

'No, you must decide, Foscani — at once. I left a jam in the pass that will take half an hour to clear — but even so.'

Someone rapped at the panel of the door. Foscani looked up with a flash of hope.

'Say you are not to be disturbed.'

'I am not to be disturbed,' he repeated.

'They are pouring through the city gates from the west!' a voice cried in agitation.

'Tell him you are not to be disturbed.'

'I am not to be disturbed,' was said again.

The rat-tat-tat of the machine-guns, muffled by walls, sounded faintly in the room. The footsteps retreated.

'I gave you one minute to make your choice.'

And out of his box of tricks Foscani produced the unexpected. Wringing his hands in despair, he burst into a flood of tears like an angry child.

'I won't, I can't!' he cried. 'Don't ask me that —

all I've striven for — fought for — I can't — oh, God, oh, God!'

Like a child he beat his head against the wall and struck at it with clenched fists.

'You rat!' said Nikko.

And in that instant Foscani played his last card. Snatching from the wall a long thin knife, one of those trophies collected from the dead men who had tried to assassinate him, he flung it with all his force at Nikko. The aim was true, but in the second lost tearing the weapon from the cord Nikko side-stepped. A foot of glittering steel flashed like a beam of light between Nikko's raised arm and his side severing the flexible wire where it lay along the floor as though it were a thread of silk. A fizz — a crackle of sparks — a tiny blue arc.

Nikko Cheyne raised his head and looked into Foscani's eyes.

Neither man spoke — nor moved — nor breathed. The machine gun had stopped firing and in the silence they listened — counting.

One — two — three — four — five — six.

And then a rumble — low at first, but gathering in volume to a deep-throated roar, that valleys and rocks, great precipices and the sullen hills seized on and flung reverberating over miles of naked space.

Nikko drew a hand across his mouth. His voice cracked.

'Your Rifles will be coming into Djevo after all.'

15

'In God's name, what is it?'

The darkness was split with tongues of leaping flame, lighting for an instant packed thousands of frightened faces. The explosion was terrifying enough for men to

drive fists into their ears and cower earthward like beaten curs — but it was as nothing compared to the roar of the water that followed after. Forty millions of tons of unchained water flung itself at the gap in the broken dam, tearing away section after section of the resisting concrete. Within less than a minute a gap of fifty feet was widened to a hundred yards. And still the tearing waters gnawed and gnawed until the whole centre of the dam bulged outward, tottered, and was swept away like a castle built of sand. With the world before it the reservoir of Sarsanova sprawled its waters across the *polji* of Issoi.

A rush of icy air was the herald of its approach as beneath a cloud of flying spray the eagre thundered down upon that huddled mass of humanity — and enveloped all.

Smothered, choking, sucked down or upflung, the cheerful assassins, who, but a few moments before, had boasted so loudly of their willingness to kill, were smashed like eggs against the jagged sides of the precipice.

Here, at this first check, the great wave licked up in a curve like the tongue of a monstrous animal. Up and up, to be hurled back and fall with the roar of an avalanche into the welter that swept in its wake. The *polji* of Issoi had become a sea lashed into creaming foam by the fury of winds — a mad nightmare sea in which wave met wave, and currents tore this way and that across the surface, and frenzied whirlpools span and sucked and gurgled.

At the entrance to the pass a pyramid of water, mountains high, hurled itself into the ravine, carrying men, horses, guns, limbers, and transport upon its gleaming crest. But the narrow gullet was as powerless to waste that gathering influx as an inch pipe to empty

a pond. The baffled water seeking other outlets divided along the cliff-face and poured in an irresistible stream toward the swallow hole of Issoi. Here the worst terrors of all were enacted. The right wing of Foscani's Rifles, borne on a ride of death, were whirled in diminishing spirals round the sides of a vortex to disappear into a black ghastliness, through hidden channels and galleries deep in the bowels of the earth, where their bodies were pulped and jellied into unrecognisable nothingness.

Thus, of the five thousand professional slayers who had set out so valiantly to the slaughter of an unarmed force, not a single man survived.

Foscani had spoken the truth in saying:

'Years hence men will speak in whispers of how my Rifles came to Djevo.'

But he did not guess the manner of their coming — he did not guess how under a pall of spray they would be flung through the city gorge by a racing wave a hundred feet tall. He did not guess how their bodies would pop up thirty-five miles away on Plesna marsh where the swallow hole of Issoi gave up its secret — or lie strewn over vineyards and pastures for crows to peck at, in the low country beyond the capital. He knew only that their coming would be remembered.

16

With that rumble in his ears, telling more surely than words that his work was done, a cord snapped in Nikko's brain. Nothing mattered now. The importance had gone out of life. Nothing mattered. A delicious ease ran through his nerves and set his spirit free. Rocking to and fro upon his heels with half-closed eyes, he abandoned himself to a mental and physical relaxation as complete as sleep.

The crackle of musketry and machine-gun fire, the shouts and cheers and cries of men, were nearer, much nearer. But what did it matter? The fighting was in bursts — was spasmodic — and in the lulls between the attacks, he heard, vaguely, the gathering thunder of onrushing water driving through the gorge. He didn't care. Five thousand men had died or were dying that this peace of mind should be his. Five thousand men.

A great number for one man to have destroyed and that man himself. Someone had to save the country — and who had a better reason? So simple it had been — so simple. Natalie would rule.

Like a pendulum he rocked — like a pendulum — the pendulum of that dim clock on the mantel shelf. This way — that way. Why, they were swaying in rhythm.

Nikko Cheyne fumbled for a chair back. Wouldn't do, he thought, to swing too far and topple over. The idea was funny and made him giggle.

Then a voice, the strangest voice, said:

'Keep still, damn you — keep still! How can I shoot if you won't keep still?'

A black sleek figure with a great white face.

It looked like a cat.

Nikko said: 'You look just like a cat.'

Foscani was supporting himself against an open drawer of his writing-table. In his right hand a pistol was waving this way and that.

'Keep still, damn you, keep still!'

Somewhere outside men's voices — terror-stricken — rifle shots and rushing feet.

'Just like a cat,' Nikko repeated.

A spurt of flame and the tinkle of glass. Foscani had fired — and missed.

He was spitting curses — cat curses. An odd thing that. And he couldn't keep the pistol steady. He was using both hands in an effort to control it.

Nikko wondered why the great cat came no nearer and slowly realised it was because he had no knees — only soft jellies that trembled and collapsed beneath his weight.

Twice more the pistol cracked and with the last shot something that felt like a red-hot sledgehammer, struck Nikko's shoulder. No, it didn't hurt — it didn't matter — only — only it started a gradual thought that his work was not finished — that there was still one duty left undone.

Nikko fumbled weakly for his pistol and found it.

Over his brain mists had begun to settle. Somewhere in the room was a cat with nine lives.

Like a clockwork figure Nikko began to fire, counting the shots aloud — one for each life.

The cat was on all fours now — crawling along by the wainscot — mewing.

'Four — five.'

Now it was down — flat.

'Six.'

Then silence.

'Nine lives,' said Nikko, and clicked the trigger three times more, but the magazine was empty.

The pistol fell from his hand.

'Have to do — have to do,' he muttered, and wondered what all that singing and crashing of glass could mean and that roar from the gorge — that deafening roar?

There was a pain in some part of him — his shoulder, perhaps; he tried to find it, letting his tunic slip from his arms to the floor. But he found only blood, warm, easy blood that trickled into the palm of his hand.

'Wish they'd stop that noise,' he muttered, and drifted through the door into a great emptiness of halls and corridors.

The palace was deserted. The rats had run. Nikko Cheyne stumbled on through the wide-open portals of the throne room. At one end, upon a dais, was the carved throne of the kings of Sciriel and stretched behind it, to mask the armorial bearings of the family, the black and crimson banner of the revolution.

Like a drunken man Nikko reeled toward the dais and, gripping the bunting in both hands with the last of his strength, tore it down.

'The cat's dead,' he said, laughed, swayed, and stumbled back into the throne.

17

LIKE a scythe the machine-guns in the Square mowed down the mounted police in the palace yard. All Djevo was at the heels of the victorious gentlemen of Plesna.

From the hideous spate in the river gorge rose a column of mist, hundreds of feet tall, which, caught by the breeze, fell like a gentle rain over the city.

With awe that found expression in silence, the citizens of Djevo watched their Queen reënter the home of her fathers.

With Natalie was Duke Ellerand of Svorzo, a group of his officers, old Baron Vilasto, who, at the firing of the first shots, had walked out to die in good company, and a body-guard among which were Raoul and Jean Festubert, little Max Gourod and Pierre Kressin.

As the doors were opened to her, Natalie said in a low voice:

'I thank you, gentlemen.'

And the Duke answered:

'The victory is God's work, not ours, Madam.'

'But I am wondering,' said Baron Vilasto, listening to the roar of the waters, 'if this victory is not the work of one brave man.' Then, crossing himself, 'And may his soul rest in peace.'

In the echoing emptiness of the deserted palace the little company moved with silent feet. At the foot of the great staircase, the Duke held up a finger.

'Will it please you to wait here for a moment, Madam?' he said. 'We will take no risks.'

He whispered some instructions to Raoul, who nodded and beckoned the rest to join him. They searched swiftly from room to room. It was Max who came running back carrying an automatic pistol.

'Foscani's dead,' said he. 'Shot by — well, this pistol belonged to the Englishman. There is an electric wire lying on the floor, cut through by a knife.'

'I knew,' said Baron Vilasto gravely.

'I think,' — cried Bettany, and there was terror in her voice — 'I think — it was all for nothing — after all.'

Between them they led her into the throne room.

The Duke of Svorzo exclaimed sharply and pointed.

Sprawling across the throne of the Montressors with blood dripping from his shoulder to a pool upon the dais was the man who had saved Sciriel. At his feet lay the crumpled banner of the revolution.

END OF BOOK IV

BOOK V

L'Envoi

BOOK V

L'ENVOI

I

BESIDE the open window of a room in the palace overlooking the sun-bathed roofs of Djevo was the bed in which Nikko Cheyne lay unconscious. Upon the balcony was Veronica and her husband Joris. They were talking.

And Joris said: 'Don't let him.'

And Veronica said: 'He must not.'

And: 'It is unthinkable.'

And was silent, only to start afresh with 'Who saved this ragtime country, anyway?'

'All right,' said Joris. 'Don't torture the point — *I* agree with you. But he's a queer chap.'

And the unconscious Nikko Cheyne, who, for two of the three weeks since the restoration of Natalie to the throne of Sciriel, had been actually unconscious, listened attentively to every word.

'I got the English papers to-day — and French. They're full of it. Look.' Something rustled. '"The man who destroyed a revolution. Lord Cheyne, the millionaire in whose veins runs the blood of the Stuarts remakes a kingdom." It's a lovely story.'

'The world's reporters are falling over one another in Djevo,' said Joris. 'It was a joke finding the keys of the treasury on Foscani's dead body. I wonder what that devil would ha' done if he'd lived long enough to do it.'

'You will talk of money — you men,' Veronica complained.

The door opened and Bettany came like a ghost into the room.

At Nikko's bed she stopped, smoothed the hair back from his forehead, and kissed it.

'Don't turn round,' said Veronica.

Then Bettany whispered to Nikko, saying this and that, as if he could really hear.

Such simple things she whispered.

Nikko did not move, but bore the exquisite torment of listening and of her touch without sign or murmur.

But to himself, over and over again, he muttered:

'Coward — coward — coward.'

And this because the greatest of all sacrifices was still to make: the wilful change of reality for a memory.

His conscience knew there was no escape — no other way. Sooner or later the break must come — as faithfully, as fully, and as finally as seven years before.

The great idea — that broad necessity in whose fulfilment broken hearts were trifling details that mattered not at all.

By his service she was a Queen — was Natalie, and in fighting that this should be so, he, Nicholas Cheyne, had put her high above his earthly reach.

There was no more of Bettany — could be no more of her. But while they lasted — for each other — while this kindly providence of sickness gave to him her lips — her whispers — her nearness, it called for greater courage than was left to him to make the final break.

A little strength was all that was needed. Determination.

But to lie there shamming — to prolong this false happiness, to be lulled by the soft touch of her into impossible dreams, it was ——

'Coward, coward.'

A band was playing in the square. Queer to think of a band playing — of old customs creeping back.

He heard Bettany's voice say:

'A flower shop was opened to-day. All down the boulevard shops are opening. Everything's coming back.'

Then from Veronica: 'Are you happy, dear?'

And the answer: 'Why doesn't he get well sooner?'

Joris pointed.

'They've seen you — those people at the railings, Madam.'

Bettany waved a hand and a faint cheer floated through the air.

Old customs — old ways — old grooves.

A cinema camera in the palace yard cocked its glass eye upward and purred approvingly.

Veronica said: 'I don't know how one tells a Queen you want to talk with her alone, but — but that's what it comes to.'

Nikko heard the two women pass out of the room.

It must be now — or never.

He set his teeth and spoke.

'Joris, old man, want to talk to you.'

'Nikko!'

'Not too loud — mustn't be heard. Come nearer — it's this.'

Joris pulled a stool beside the bed and leaned forward. And Nikko began to talk — very clearly sometimes — and sometimes ramblingly. At the end:

'I'm not complaining, it just is so — something to accept. I would like to have said good-bye to her — and a few others, only — it's this wound, perhaps — shaken my nerve a bit — given me the funks. I'd only make a fool of myself. You understand — 'sides, it's better the other way.'

'Nikko,' said Joris, 'look here — look here. But you're the hero of Sciriel, man — the idol of ——'

'Sorry,' Nikko cut in, 'but don't argue with me. The thing's settled. I've been over it and over it and I *do* know. I'm relying on you.'

Joris Howard's face was all knotted with apprehension. He scratched his forehead helplessly.

'Veronica will just kill me for this,' he said. 'And, damn you, it's not as if you were right.'

'I know,' Nikko repeated.

2

In the council chamber a number of men sat at a table.

They were presided over by Duke Ellerand of Svorzo, who now and again pulled at his Hapsburg whiskers as whiskered men will do when puzzled.

'Sit down, Saint-Just, sit down,' he remarked testily; 'it disturbs my mind, seeing you jump to your feet so often.'

'And mine,' said the gentleman addressed, a lean, cadaverous man with nervous hands. 'I assure you it is quite involuntary. But that orderly — whenever he comes into the room — he is so very like the warder who was in charge of me at Plevi. One — one assumes a habit.'

Baron Vilasto nodded sympathetically.

The Duke drew a scroll on his blotting-pad and cleared his throat.

'Yes — to be sure, yes,' he said. 'And Vilasto here is urging us to change our habits.'

'In a measure, I do,' said Vilasto. 'For a few generations we have walked through paths in a wood with such regularity that we have worn away the grass and taught ourselves to believe there is no other route. Suddenly those paths have been closed to us and Na-

ture, rude elemental Nature, has smothered them with thorn and briar and swallowed up the bit of twisted civilisation we had rescued from the wild. But men have sickened of the briar and the thorn that scratched their hands and tore their clothes to rags, and have pleaded for paths again, that they may walk at ease from one place to another. Now, I may well be at fault in this, but I would be very loath to reopen the old winding paths when with the same axe I can cut new ones that follow a straighter course.'

'A wordy speech, Vilasto,' said the Duke, 'but I see the trend. After this upheaval, eh, you think the people will not welcome a return of the old ways.'

'Of some old ways, but not of all. If in the past our constitution had been as perfect as it is pleasant to believe it was, I cannot think the revolution would have taken place. Let us give Sciriel all the colour of kings and queens but let those kings and queens speak with a human voice. Gentlemen, during the past dreadful months, while wandering these streets with an air of some simplicity, I think I formed a truer estimate of our little country than ever was given to me by looking down upon it from a palace window. Our whole State is barely the size of an English county — our greatest city not much bigger than a market town. Is not that excuse enough for us to form our thoughts in some proportion?'

'We matter to ourselves,' said the Duke, 'to our traditions. Our pride of race is not margined by a count of heads — roofs — or acres.'

'Speaking of tradition and of race,' said Vilasto, 'I was dipping this morning into an English book with which you, Monsieur le Duc, will be familiar. It is a work of some importance and of many volumes, entitled Burke's "Landed Gentry."'

'I know of the work — but it would be idle to pretend I have read it,' came the answer.

'One is not expected to do more than dip, I am sure,' said Vilasto, 'but it contains a fund of most valuable information. There I discovered, for instance, that the Barons of Cheyne are directly descended from the line of that unhappy monarch, the Royal Martyr, King Charles I. Interesting, I thought — significant.'

Several of the gentlemen present exchanged meaning glances, or nodded among themselves.

The Duke hummed.

'We know which way your favour tends, Vilasto.'

The orderly entered with a despatch.

'Please keep your seat, Saint-Just.'

'With difficulty I have succeeded in so doing,' said that statesman.

The orderly saluted and went out.

Vilasto leaned across the table.

'We know what is in the Queen's mind and in her heart. Those of us who saw what happened in the throne room that night you entered Djevo will not readily forget. We know, too, how, in the imaginations of the people, the name of Cheyne is a magic name. They regard him as a hero — a redeemer. Gentlemen, this country was saved by that man's love for — for a woman.'

'A Queen!'

'A woman. But for that love Sciriel would have ceased to exist. Is it strange that she — the woman — should demand that love in the name of the country it has rewon for her?'

The Duke of Svorzo sighed.

'Not strange — but human — very human.'

'And in my opinion,' said a gentleman, who up to this point had not spoken, 'after what Sciriel has

passed through, the human element will prove her salvation.'

'Then it seems,' said the Duke, 'there is no more to be said. It is true our debt to Lord Cheyne could hardly be greater. I wish I had not spoken to him as I did that night on Plesna marsh.' He pushed back his chair. 'Well, gentlemen, I will offer our loyalty to the Queen.'

As they were leaving the council chamber, Duke Ellerand of Svorzo slipped an arm through one of Vilasto's.

'But you've changed your views, old friend,' he said. Vilasto smiled deprecatingly.

'With the times, Monsieur le Duc — with the times. But for an open mind, I should have died years ago.'

3

JORIS HOWARD was at the wheel of the car that bore Nikko to the frontier. He spoke only once and that was as the car passed out of the palace yard.

'This is the worst mistake a man ever made.'

Nikko did not reply. He sat staring before him with eyes that saw nothing.

They had started a little after dawn, but even at that hour many citizens were in the street, for the frenzy of reconstruction drew men early from their beds.

In the great boulevard the car slowed down to pass an obstruction and a voice cried out:

'Name of a name, it's Cheyne!'

Little Max Gourod leapt upon the running-board.

'Cheyne — and the whole town believes you are lying unconscious at the palace! Cheyne! Cheyne!'

A few workmen overhearing, as who could not, for the voice of Max in moments of excitement was the

voice of a fog-horn, drew nearer staring with wide-open eyes and mouths. Then someone started a cheer.

'Cheyne! The Englishman! Cheyne!'

Windows and doors were flung open — heads popped out, men and women in all manner of snatched-up garments came running, pushing, tumbling.

'The Englishman, where is the Englishman?'

Struggling for a sight of that mythical being who single-handed had destroyed an army — the man who had rescued the Queen — split the dam of Sarsanova — released the avenging waters and set the country free.

And Max, shouting above the din:

'But we thought you were lying unconscious!'

For a man of few ideas was Max.

'We thought you were lying unconscious!'

Nikko, white as paper, trembling from head to foot, leaned forward and touched Joris on the arm.

'For God's sake, get me out of this.'

But the crowd swelled and followed to the very gates of the city, with Max riding on the running-board, shouting:

'See who's here! See who's here!'

Perhaps the last act of violence to end that era of unrest was the raiding of the flower shop by women and a cascade of flowers scattered into the car.

And then they were outside the city walls, going faster — faster.

Nikko was happy — he told himself that over and over again, dinning it into his imagination by constant repetition.

'I'm happy. It's inevitable — can't be helped. I'm happy.'

Only ——

The road was endless, and while still in Sciriel ——

Once over the frontier it would be different. Then he would be able to look back and see it all broadly — impersonally.

Of course it was right.

'I'm happy,' he said.

To right and left the vineyards were strewn with queer, untidy shapes — with here and there a flash of water where the floods had not yet retreated. Once he saw the broken wheel of a gun-carriage: one of those guns he had passed that night. What a distance it had been carried!

Scheza — the crossroads with the finger-post to Plesna — then that long stretch over the flat country with the Forest of Svorzo in the distance.

On and on with the mountains drawing nearer every minute.

The leech-gatherer's hut — that gruesome pond with a sword hilt still rising above the water's surface.

And now the road was rising — curling, twisting up the steep sides of foothills of the range.

If they did not reach and pass the frontier soon, Nikko felt he should go mad — mad for all his happiness. Over his heart something was strained to bursting point.

Only a few hundred yards more, and then ——

A white barrier was drawn across the road — a sentry brought his rifle to the ready — an officer stepped from the guard-house and held up his hand.

Joris Howard pulled up the car within a few inches of the barrier.

The officer stepped up to Nikko and saluted.

'Lord Cheyne?' he asked.

'Yes — no — well?' said Nikko. 'Let me through, please.'

The officer shook his head.

'I have a message for you,' he said, 'a telephone message from the palace — from the Queen.'

Nikko breathed uneasily — bit his lip — said nothing.

'Her Majesty said would you please await her here, as she wishes to accompany you?'

The strain over Nikko's heart broke with a tang that found expression in a cry of agony.

'No, no, no! Open the gate! Let me through!'

'Her Majesty said further, that if you refused to wait, I was to hold you prisoner, Lord Cheyne, until her arrival.'

And then it seemed to Nikko that all the backbone was torn from him and he fell limp upon the seat of the car.

Joris Howard put an arm round him.

'Lord Cheyne will be all right with me, Monsieur; he will wait.'

In the valley below a cloud of dust came nearer and nearer.

And presently there were two cars side by side.

Natalie Melliora Elizabeta Maria, Queen of Sciriel, stepped out and addressed the officer.

'Order your men into the guard-room,' she said. 'I wish to speak with this gentleman alone.'

The order was given.

'And you, Monsieur.'

Joris Howard vanished after the others.

Then Bettany spoke to Nikko, saying:

'Am I coming with you, my lover, or you with me?'

'Bettany ——' he began, but could not go on.

'Is it to be what I want, my lover, what all Sciriel wants — or shall we go over the frontier together?'

Once again he tried to speak and failed.

Then she put her arms round him and whispered:

'There is no choice really — is there? There could be no choice.'

THE END

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GENTLEMEN MARCH

CHIVALRY · AUDACITY · LOYALTY

By ROLAND PERTWEE

ROLAND PERTWEE

like Aubrey Beardsley, was born in Brighton — the Atlantic City of England — and like Beardsley began his career as an artist before turning to literature. He served an apprenticeship under John Singer Sargent and Alma-Tadema, and later gave up art for the stage, where his talent for portraiture, coupled with a taste for mimicry, brought him success in a number of character parts played under the management of H. B. Irving.

'I had always written,' says Pertwee, 'but until the war I wrote for my own amusement. With the war and enlistment I attacked writing seriously and scribbled away in every conceivable corner of France.' Short stories came first, and in 1918 his first novel, 'Our Wonderful Selves,' was written in a convalescent hospital. Roland Pertwee won thousands of American readers by his sparkling mystery story 'Rivers to Cross,' and critics agree that few contemporary writers handle the light tale of adventure with greater charm or more genuine literary skill. His new book, 'Gentlemen March,' is in all ways its worthy successor. Says the *New York Times:* 'If you have a dinner engagement to keep, don't begin a novel by Roland Pertwee!'